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THE BODY BANK

By Dr. Arthur Barron



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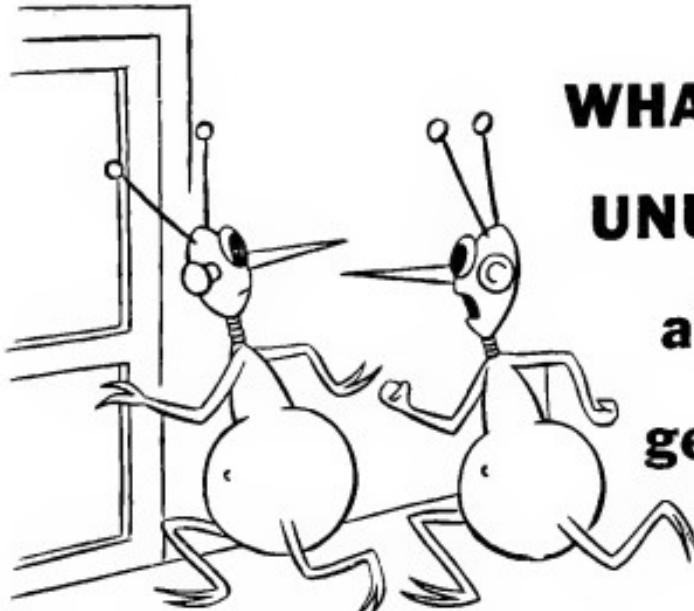


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IT WOULD SEEM—

that a science fiction editor should have basic problems no greater than those of a mystery book, a love story, or a western story editor. The editor of a western story book simply watches for good westerns, so it would seem that a science fiction editor should have only to look for good science fiction. But let's see what happens when he falls into such an innocent looking trap.

We'll say he searches diligently and comes up with a space adventure yarn that rivals Burrough's Mars books. It goes over well but a sizable segment of his readership write in and say: It was great but why don't you find another 1984—that Orwell science fiction novel. We like science fiction tied in with current situations.

So ye ed bludgeons some unsung genius into out-Orwelling Orwell and another chunk of his cherished subscribers write: Look here now, science fiction without spaceships just ain't s-f, so stir your indolent bones and find us a rousing space opera or we'll go bowling every night.

So space opera it is and the letters pour in from readers saying that was great but how about some stories based on pure science—the kind in which no science professor is able to trip the author up on a single scientific detail. The editor conforms and wham! in come the letters stating: You're on the wrong track, junior. We want stories about people we can understand as human beings. We don't enjoy buddying up to an omnipotent computer.

So that's how it goes, all of which makes a science fiction editor's job a challenge and a joy.

Those poor 'tec and western editors. Their lives must be pure boredom.—PWF

They became the lords of the solar system—the conquerors of cosmic space—only to find in the end that there was—

NO PLACE TO GO

By HENRY SLESAR

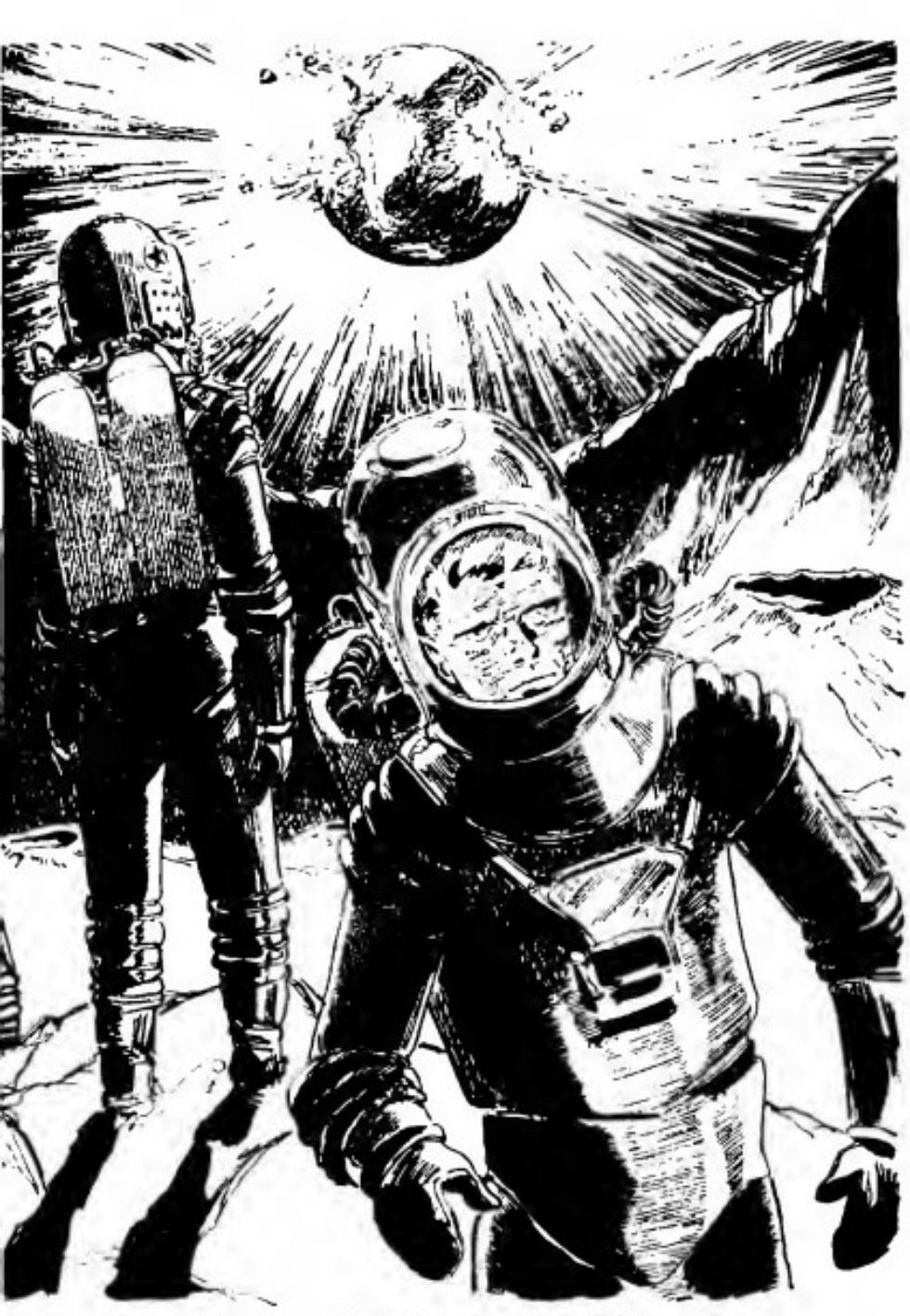
ILLUSTRATOR SCHROEDER

THERE were four of them. Major Cato was the leader, because the gold leafs on his shoulder said he was, and because the others felt he was. Casey Strauss was the navigator, a big, gruff young man who rarely talked or smiled. Finney was the co-pilot, a slender, engaging man, popular with women. Bob Joyce was the youngest, and the most erudite. He knew rockets, and that was important to a rocket crew, even on their sixth journey to the Earth's neighbor.

They were the elite. They were four out of a squadron whose members numbered less than sixty. But out of the fif-



Each man suffered in his



own private hell as he watched the cosmic explosion.

teen exploratory moon trips to date, they had made six. They were proud, but not cocky. Space took care of that. It was too vast to sustain cockiness.

The sixth landing was the easiest one yet. They cheered Major Cato until he was forced into an embarrassed command that silenced them. Then they began the long, arduous preparations to establish camp on the moon.

"Lieutenant Finney," Major Cato said.

"Yes, sir?"

"I want our radio gear set up before anything else. Command headquarters wants immediate contact, so we can't afford to wait until we erect shelters. That must be done first."

"Sure," Finney grinned, his handsome face obscured behind the plate of his helmet. "I'll set it up, Major. Wouldn't mind getting a message to Frisco myself; there's a little gal named Gloria—"

"Save it," Cato said, moving off towards the others.

He wasn't a big man, even in the bulky space suit. He was compact and thickly muscled, and his soldierly stride was almost comical in the lesser gravity. But his crew didn't smile.

Casey Strauss was removing supplies from the ship with the aid of Bob Joyce. He was mumbling through his helmet microphone all the time, as if in complaint. Joyce seemed to be elated; he tossed the supply car-

tons about like a juggler, exhilarated by their reduced weight.

"Snap it up," Major Cato said. "We don't have time for games, Joyce."

"Yes, sir; sorry, sir," Joyce said hastily.

"This isn't a kiddie picnic," the Major said.

"No, sir."

When he walked off again, Joyce tapped Strauss' arm and jerked his head in the Major's direction, as if to say: "What's eating him?" He couldn't say it aloud; the helmet communicators received all messages. There weren't any spoken secrets among the crew.

They worked hard, and diligently, and with a minimum of waste. They might have been detailed to a supply depot on Earth. It wasn't that they were inured to the mystery of space, but they were a taut crew, and it was business before pleasure, work before wonderment.

Four hours later, Cato called a halt to their efforts.

They stood around in the gray-white dust, in a valley of jagged rocks and craters, and looked at the magnificence of the sky. The stars, unblurred by the hazy clouds of Earth, shone diamond-hard overhead. But the eight eyes on the moon sought out only one object in the heavens—the awesome, beautiful greenish globe that had given them life.

"Earth," Strauss muttered. "God, it makes me feel funny, looking at it. I guess I'll never

get over that feeling, if I see it a million times."

"I know what you mean," Finney said wryly. "Damn thing makes you choke up inside, like it was a woman or something."

"That's because it's home," Joyce said. "You've got to feel that way about it. It's home."

"All right!" Major Cato snapped. "Let's stop day-dreaming. Everybody back to the ship. We'll get some rations and hit the sack; we can't work if we don't eat and sleep."

They returned to the slim shaft of white and silver metal that had brought them there, and as they walked, without speaking, the three men in Major Cato's command exchanged looks that were as explicit as words. What was eating him? What was wrong with Major Cato?

They ate, and then they slept, and then they returned to work.

An hour afterwards, it happened.

Finney was fooling with the radio gear, and puzzling over short bursts of static. Strauss and Bob Joyce were stacking oxygen equipment, and Major Cato was inside the vessel.

Finney saw it first. He shouted so loudly into his helmet mike that he nearly burst the eardrums of the others. They came on a flying run to his side, and followed the direction of his pointing arm and horrified eyes. Then the light came to flood the

universe with blinding power, a light so strong and incredibly bright that it dimmed the sun. Then there was the sound, reverberating through the cosmos and making the very craters of the moon tremble. But their eyes revealed the worst of what was happening, eyes that were riveted on the green world overhead.

There, on the murky patch of land that would have been Europe (where they couldn't say: France, Germany, Italy, Spain? A thousand images crowded their minds) there, like a monstrous white fist bursting its way out of the greenish globe, came a cloud whose deadly nature was instantly apparent. Then the horror was compounded, as the cloud grew greater and greater still, and was succeeded by a rendering concussion that tore a gigantic hole in the very surface of the world. Enough! Enough! their minds cried, but the nightmare wasn't ended. Another blast came from north of the first, and then another from the east, and still another. The hole erupted fire, and mountains flew from the surface into space. And then there were no end of eruptions; volcanically they came, belching smoke and hellfire and debris, tearing the very heart from the hemisphere, and then encasing the globe itself in an envelope of blue flame that seemed to sear and shrivel it before their eyes, until the Earth ("It's home," Joyce had said) the Earth that

had borne them, was a black, misshapen ember, reeking and loathesome and seemingly discarded by the God who had made it.

The four witnesses to the cataclysm stood sculptured in horror and disbelief, each suffering their own private hell. Then, as the mighty sounds diminished and the fires died in the night sky, they began to move. Casey Strauss lifted both hands to the cinder that had been Earth and clenched huge fists, shaking them in rage, shouting curses. Finney dropped to his knees on the gray-white dust and went limp. Joyce, the youngest, wandered off in an erratic course, as if walking could take him away from the terror he had seen. Only Major Cato remained fixed to the spot, a rigid monument as solid as the rocks of Tycho Brahe.

In their helmet receivers, they heard only the unending sound of Strauss' invective, until his curses became unintelligible mumbling, and he stopped. Then they saw the big man, like a felled oak, fall to the ground.

Cato reached him first.

"Finney," he commanded. "Help me."

Finney didn't answer.

"Joyce!" Major Cato shouted. "We've got to get Casey into the ship. He's in a state of shock—"

Joyce turned in his wandering and stared back at his superior officer. Then he returned

slowly, and helped the Major carry the unconscious navigator into the ship. They undid his helmet, and looked at his open, staring eyes and blue lips. They removed the rest of his rig, and Cato rolled up the man's sleeve and gave him an injection of a drug which would induce relaxation and sleep. They covered him with a blanket, and Cato ordered Joyce to his bunk.

"Take this," he said brusquely, handing the younger man two small white tablets. "Take these and hit the sack; that's an order. I'm going out to get Finney."

He returned to the surface, and hoisted the limp co-pilot by the shoulders. Finney looked up at him with a twisted grin and said: "Her name's Gloria, Major. From San Francisco . . ."

They slept, sedated, for almost twenty hours, with Major Cato watching over them from the pilot's chair until he nodded and slept himself. Then they began to stir and waken, reluctantly, and started to talk quietly among themselves about what had happened. They spoke tonelessly, dispassionately; it was the only way they could talk. Only Strauss seemed unable to make his lips and mind work; he mumbled senselessly into his microphone, until Finney suddenly leaped from his bunk in a cry of rage.

"Stop him! Shut him up!" Finney screamed. "He'll drive us all nuts!"

Cato shot out of his chair and went to Strauss' bunk. He unthreaded a bolt in the big man's suit and then reached in to yank a wire that silenced his mumblings.

"All right," he told them curtly. "Now we've got to talk. We've got to figure things out."

"Figure what?" Joyce said numbly. "What's there to figure? Earth's gone. We've got no place to go . . ."

"Then we have to stay here," Cato snapped. "And if we want to survive, then we've got certain agreements to make. The most important item we have to conserve is air, so that means we live in our suits until we can't stand our stink any longer. We've got food enough to last another six months, maybe even a year. The water tank will hold up more than that, if we're careful . . ."

"You're crazy," Finney said, his voice cracking. "It'll never last that long. And what's the difference if it did? We'll struggle along for a little while, and then—"

"Stop it!" Cato said harshly. "We can't afford any hysteria. If we want to stay alive as long as we can, we've got to use every minute and every ounce of energy."

"What's the use? What's the use?" Finney moaned. "We can't save ourselves here. And there's no place else to go—"

"Easy," Joyce said, swallowing hard. "We've got to make an effort." He fell on his bunk

and put his head in his hands. "If only we had the fuel—if only we could make it to Mercury or Mars—"

"Don't talk wildly," Cato said. "There's not a chance for such a thing, we've got to make our stand right here, with what we have. It may be a short life, but it'll be a busy one."

"Look," Finney said.

They turned to watch Casey Strauss rise from his bunk, his eyes focused nowhere.

"Thou hast laid the foundations of the Earth," Strauss muttered. "The heavens are the work of thine hands . . ."

"He's praying," Joyce said.

"No." Cato took a step towards the navigator. "That's not prayer. Look at his eyes."

"They shall perish, but thou remainst," Strauss said, his voice rising, his hands lifting slowly from his sides. "They shall wax old as doth a garment, and as a vesture shalt thou fold them up, and they shall be changed . . ."

"Casey! Can you hear me?"

"Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and is become the habitation of devils . . ."

"He's mad!" Finney said. "He's gone mad!"

"It's only shock." Cato came closer and touched the big man's arm. "Casey, get hold of yourself."

"Rejoice over her, thou heaven!" Strauss shrieked, raising his fists. "In one hour is she made desolate . . . for God has avenged you on her . . ."

"Casey!" shouted Major Cato.

The great fists of the navigators came crashing down on the Major's shoulders. He grunted and lost his balance, and in a flash the big man was upon him, the huge hands circling his neck; only the thick folds of the space suit kept Cato from strangling. Joyce shouted and leaped to aid the officer, while Finney stared stupidly at the scene.

Strauss' strength was of madman's quality. It took ten minutes of struggle to pacify him. Then Cato, breathing hard, said: "We'll have to chain him to the bunk, until he calms down. Finney—let's have that hypo again. We'll knock him out for a few hours."

Finney brought the needle. "Here," he said. "Why not knock him out for good, Major? He won't be any use to anybody now."

Cato looked at the co-pilot sharply, and then set to work.

Six hours later, wearied by thinking and by effort, they fell asleep again. But Major Cato was awakened by an unfamiliar sound in the ship's cabin, and he whispered:

"Joyce?"

The sound stopped.

"Bob, is that you?"

Joyce's voice, muffled by his pillow, answered.

"I—I'm sorry, Major. I couldn't help myself."

"Don't worry about it; I feel like crying myself. When I

think about the stupidity of it—"

"But it's worse than that, Major. I—I can't describe how I feel. Just the idea that there's no more Earth—no more home. I feel so drained, empty; I never felt so alone in my life."

"It's the worst loneliness you can suffer." Cato's voice was gentle. "I know what you're going through. But we have to face up to it. All we've got left is our determination to stay alive."

There was a silence.

"I don't want to die, Major."

"Then let's live. For as long as we can."

The four men slept again.

The warning came out of Cato's dreams. Like an alarm bell, it rang in his unconscious and jarred him awake, his eyes flying open in time to see the shadowy figure standing in the middle of the floor. He shouted: "Finney!"

The co-pilot whirled towards him, eyes flashing wildly. Then he raised his arm and fired the weapon in his hand; the explosive bullet thundered against the bulkhead and ricocheted. Cato dove low and tackled his legs, bringing the tall, slender man to the floor of the cabin. Joyce was out of his bunk in an instant, clicking on the light that flooded the ship's interior and revealing the battle taking place between the senior officers. Even Strauss stirred and tried to rise, blinking at them, almost conscious again of his surroundings.

"Drop it!" Cato said gratingly, struggling for the gun. "Drop it, Finney!"

"Let go, let go!"

Joyce jumped to his aid, kicking at Finney's wrist until the co-pilot howled and released the weapon. Then Cato dragged him to his feet and shook him.

"What happened?" Joyce said.

"Lieutenant Finney had ideas. He thought he'd increase the size of the rations a little . . ."

"I wouldn't hurt you, Major!" Finney blubbered. "So help me, I was going to take care of them, only them!"

On his bunk, Casey Strauss was looking at the chains anchored to his arms and legs, and his big face was puzzled.

"What's this?" he said gruffly. "What's the big idea?"

Joyce grinned. "Looks like Casey's snapping out of it. I only hope it's permanent."

"It doesn't matter," Cato said wearily. "He'll be all right in a little while. We'll all be all right. Even you, Finney."

"What do you mean?"

"The game's over. I'm supposed to hold out for another twenty-four hours, but I can't take that chance. So I'm calling a halt right now."

Joyce stared at him, bewildered. "What game, Major? What are you talking about?"

"Unchain Strauss and get the airlocks open. We're going outside."

"Unchain him? But Major—"

"We'll take the chance. Let him go."

Joyce obeyed, while the Major held Finney's weapon pointed at the co-pilot. Then he dropped the gun contemptuously on his bunk and said: "You, too, Finney. We're all going out."

They opened the airlocks, and stood about, waiting for Cato's command.

"I'll go first," he said.

They followed him out onto the moon's surface.

"Now look," Cato said.

They turned their eyes in the direction of his pointing arm.

They stood around in the gray-white dust, in a valley of jagged rocks and craters, and looked at the magnificence of the sky. The stars, unblurred by the hazy clouds of Earth, shone diamond-hard overhead. But the eight eyes on the moon sought out only one object in the heavens—the awesome, beautiful greenish globe of Earth.

"A miracle! A miracle!" Strauss cried, choking with sobs.

"The Earth," Finney said dully. "It wasn't destroyed. It didn't happen at all . . ."

Joyce couldn't speak. He turned to the Major and stared, unbelievingly.

"No," Cato said. "It didn't happen at all, not really. It was an hallucination, a delusion, and I created it for you. The food you ate the first night contained a drug, a hypnotic chemical. When you were asleep, and under its influence, I planted this terrible vision in your heads. I

(Continued on page 146)



REPORT ON SOL III

By ROBERT BLOCH

ILLUSTRATOR SCHOENHERR

RABOR flowed into the hall where Yem vibrated.

They twined tentacles until contact was established, and then Rabor began to pulse.

We take pride in our culture, our advancement up the evolutionary scale. But possibly "civilization" is only a comparative term.

"I am ready with a preliminary report on Sol III," he vibrated.

Yem tingled. "Ah, yes. The major life-forms, I suppose?"

Rabor oozed embarrassment. "Not exactly. Kwor and Zyla dealt with the *major* life-forms—micro-organisms, vegetable matter, insects."

Yem tingled more strongly. "Then you gathered data on the fourth most important group—the creatures inhabiting the seas?"

Rabor fleched uneasily. "No. I was assigned to mammals."

"The flying things?"

"They are called birds. Mammals are the others—quadrupeds and bipeds. And the bipeds rule Sol III."

Yem writhed in confusion. "That is strange. One would hardly expect a minority to attain power."

"There are many strange things about Sol III," Rabor pulsated. I hardly know where to begin, it is all so incredible. Even our most creative dreamers could not throb such fantasies."

"Allow me to be the judge," Yem pulsed. "I take it the expedition encountered no difficulties?"

"That is correct. The micro-organisms paid no heed, and the other life-forms have a limited visual range. We were well above their perceptual abilities, so we could go about our studies without hindrance."

"You infer that the inhabitants might have proven hostile if they could have perceived you?"

Rabor grinded. "Only the bipeds—but their hostility exceeds

the wildest imaginings. Not only do they destroy all other life-forms for food, or merely for pleasure, but they also frequently destroy one another."

It was Yem's turn to grinch. "One another?"

"Yes. That is their principal occupation."

"Are you quite sure you did not misconstrue their actions?" Yem vibrated.

"Quite sure. We were able to learn one of their two forms of communication—a primitive method called *speech*. A study of the meaning of these sounds, or *words*, confirms our findings. The second method, employing visual symbols known as *writing*, has not been mastered, though we have specimens for further examination. But in words and deeds, we have found the purpose of the bipeds—who call themselves *men*—unmistakable."

"Fantastic!" Yem pulsed.

"I assured you it would be. Men are divided into intricate tribal units, each intent on the destruction of the other. The slightest difference in method of government, form of worship, minor custom, speech, or even pigmentation, is sufficient excuse to visit extermination upon the enemy."

"*Enemy?*" Yem quizzled.

"A speech-form," Rabor throbbed. "Meaning, 'one whom I hate because he has something I want' or, conversely, 'one whom I hate because he wants

something I have.' In reality, of course, the conflict is over the material possession of the planet and its resources. This conflict, waged between large groups of rivals, is called *war*. When waged by small groups or individuals, it is called *business* or *competition*. But the end is the same—to totally defeat the enemy, and gain more resources.

"What resources?"

"Land. Food. Minerals. Gas. Chemicals."

"What is done with these resources?"

"Why, they are consumed and destroyed as quickly as possible. The very act of *war* destroys a large proportion of them. And the purpose of *business* is to urge and incite men to consume as much as possible. Since almost half of the men are either engaged in *war* or preparations for future *war*, and nearly all the rest are engaged in *business*, you can see how quickly the destruction proceeds."

"Yet you spoke of worship," Yem pulsated. "Do they not recognize the Supreme Being?"

"Let us say that they are aware of Him. But their recognition varies. Each group has a different concept, and each believes that its concept is the only correct one; for that reason, those of different beliefs are to be hated."

"But are there no exceptions? Is there not a group which identifies the Supreme Being with peace, or even a group

which refuses to recognize a Supreme Being at all?"

"Indeed, there are such groups. But they are the most warlike of all. In fact, the group which identifies the Supreme Being with peace has so many quarrels and disputes amongst its own members as to the exact nature of the Deity that they fight amongst themselves. And when you add to this the hatreds fomented by the differences in speech and customs, and in pigmentation—"

"Please," Yem queebled. "You are making my tentacles ache. Can't you vibrate about something more pleasant? Surely these men are like any other living entities. They take pleasure in reality, do they not? They revere natural beauty—"

"Not greatly. Most of their time, as I revealed to you, is spent in *competition*. They train for it almost from the moment of birth, and give their later lives almost entirely to that end. As a result, they live, mainly, in portions of the planet unsuited to their physical well-being, so that their bodies must be concealed by coverings and much of their time spent in artificially-heated shelters. They seldom venture forth from these dwellings except to proceed from one to another, and if they travel any distance at all, it is in an enclosed vehicle."

"But surely they can see their surroundings?"

"They take the utmost pains

to avoid such awareness. Even when journeying in their vehicles, they take care to line the routes of travel with huge structures bearing words and injunctions to consume, which block out the view of nature. The dust and dirt and gases shroud their cities in a pall, and artificial illumination blots out all sight of their world as it appears by night. And they further escape consideration of nature through their arts—"

"Ah," Yem tingled. "Their arts."

"I cannot begin to make you comprehend, Rabor throbbed. "Their arts are not like ours."

"You mean they do not glorify the wonder of nature, or of life itself?" Yem wriggled in dismay. "But they have sensory apparatus, and they reproduce. Surely they enjoy the greatest of natural pleasures and make of it their principal source of artistic achievement?"

"Their enjoyment is furtive," Rabor responded writhingly. "There are many intricate laws and customs regulating participation in this pleasure. Usually the reproductive act must be accomplished in total darkness, and almost always in secrecy. Even an open allusion to the act in *speech* or *writing* is forbidden, and artists who depict it are punished by law."

"But is not the activity itself considered a form of artistic expression?"

"No—quite the contrary! The

slightest deviation from custom is punishable. And the indulgence itself, hedged about as it is with danger and difficulty, is frequently further hindered by the participants themselves. One of the commonest customs, in regions where the climate permits, is for a mating couple to journey forth in a small, enclosed vehicle to a large arena where huge images are flashed upon a great screen in darkness. And there, amidst an assemblage of hundreds of other couples in their vehicles, they conduct themselves with preconditioned shame and embarrassment."

"Monstrous!" Yem tingled. "No wonder they prefer to spend their time killing one another! But one would think that it would be unsafe to assemble in such a group as the one you speak about. Do they not fear their companions?"

"No. One individual is not allowed to harm another individual for personal reasons. No man is permitted to kill his enemy, however valid the reasons may be for his hatred. And no man is permitted to end the life of a loved one—even if the loved one is doomed to pain and inevitable death. An individual who takes an individual life is a *murderer*, who will be killed in turn by process of law.

"If, however, an individual kills a stranger, during a war, he is a *hero*. The more strangers he kills, the greater a *hero* he becomes. He then rises to a position as leader or even ruler."

Yem twisted. "That is impossible! I cannot believe in the existence of so unnatural a life-form anywhere in the universe! A being that loathes the very act which created it, a being that hates its own kind, a being that is forbidden to destroy an actual enemy but is encouraged to kill utter strangers because of a difference in appearance or customs or belief. Rabor, I cannot accept this report of yours—it is preposterous!"

Rabor flushed and grinded simultaneously. "I swear that all this is true; all this and much more! If you could only see for yourself—"

"I will see," Yem tingled. "You will take me to Sol III yourself, and now!"

"But—"

"No objections! I shall order the ship immediately! Get ready to show me all this."

And so it came to pass that Rabor and Yem voyaged together to Sol III and set down in a region known as the Everglades, from which they quickly vulffed to a certain spot just outside Palm Beach.

"Before we observe the actual beings," Rabor proposed, "I have in mind that you should familiarize yourself with certain of their domestic customs. For this reason, I would like to conduct you to one of their dwelling-places. During this portion of Sol III's cycle, many of the larger ones are deserted, and we can examine one at leisure. I

have in mind a certain mansion—"

"Mansion?"

"A large living-structure. The word is a contraction of two others; *man*, an individual being, and *shun*, meaning to avoid. It is a house where a *man* lives when he is important enough in *business* to be able to avoid other men. Only the leaders can live in mansions, but it is there that you will find the most representative display of Sol III culture."

"Very well," Yem throbbed.

They vulffed onward until Rabor located the mansion, which was set amidst the grounds of a private estate. It was indeed deserted, and they flowed into it freely.

Rabor conducted Yem on a hasty tour of inspection.

"Living room," he said.

"They live here? This is the room for reproduction?"

"No. As I explained, that is a private act. In a dwelling it is generally performed in the room set aside for rest—the *bedroom*."

"But what is all this apparatus, then?"

"Furniture. The bipeds spend most of their time doubled up or contorted into odd positions called *sitting* or *lying down*."

"This is called living?"

"Indeed. Bipeds devote most of their waking hours to labor at *business* or *war*, just so that they can enjoy a few hours to themselves, during which they *sit* or *recline*, as they please. And, of course, one-third of their lives

is spent in complete rest, or sleep. This time is passed in the bedroom. Here it is."

"But such a small and gloomy place," Yem tingled. "I would not wish to pass a third of my existence here! Even if it was all devoted to pleasure."

"Bathroom," Rabor pulsed, as they flowed on. Briefly he explained the process of elimination and the functions of cleansing and adorning the body.

"Very vital," Yem throbbed. "But why then is this not the biggest room? Surely what happens here is most important of all? And is it not a source of pride to men that they can eliminate waste-products and clean themselves regularly? I should think they would want their fellow-men to observe these efforts towards betterment. A larger room—" He paused. "Like this one—"

Rabor vibrated. "No. This is the *dining-room*, where men eat. They gather together here in happy social groups to consume the flesh of animals and devour vegetables and fruits."

Yem quatched sneffly. "You mean they are actually *happy* to eat what they have killed? And they are not ashamed to perform the function publicly?"

"All their greatest festivals involve eating."

"But that is horrible! To conceal the functions which make one a better, cleaner, healthier being—and to openly display one's cruelty, greed and ca-

pacity for absorbing the substance of other living things! Ridiculous!"

Rabor quickly flowed into the study. "You wished to learn for yourself about their art and culture," he pulsated. "Here you will find evidences of what I informed you about."

His tentacles waved. "Books," he vibrated. "Containing the words of communication. And on the walls, pictures. Men excel in the graphic arts."

Yem quiggled the pictures. "Horrible!" he fleched. "What is the meaning of these monstrosities?"

"This is, as I previously explained, art. In fact, it is the very highest form of art. Only a few great leaders are able to own such examples, which were created by a man called Picasso."

"But these things are hideous—who can bear the sight of them? Even on Saturn you won't find such horrors. Do men really look like *this*?"

"Of course not. It is not considered artistic to portray men as they are, nor anything in nature. Misrepresentation is the greatest and most important characteristic of creative activity. Words placed together without meaning are called poems. Lumps of inanimate substance kneaded into grotesque, misshapen forms are called sculpture. Then there are sounds, called music. But allow me to demonstrate—"

Rabor's tentacle twiddled with

the dial of a television set. The screen flickered into life.

"Do not be alarmed," he throbbed. "These are only images, transmitted for enjoyment. Actually, they are meant only to consume time between *business* announcements. If you will only watch for a while, I am sure they will have music."

Yem watched.

He watched for almost two hours, during which he learned more about man than Rabor could ever have explained.

He saw a pile advertisement and watched animated animals singing and dancing around rolls of toilet-paper. He saw three different automobiles, each the lowest-priced of the Low Three. He witnessed divers, lumberjacks, riflemen and athletes demonstrating their virility by puffing on various brands of cigarettes. He saw the thrilling race between two pills descending into cross-sections of the human stomach.

And in between were actual *human beings*, as they called themselves, entertaining the viewers by shooting one another, going insane, plotting robberies and holdups and kidnappings, punching one another with their fists, or attempting to steal each other's mates. And every so often there were episodes involving various groups of bipeds called *families*, who seemed to live in still another world. In *this* world, there were no scenes of violence; everything was quite

friendly and amusing, and most of the events involved methods whereby the female and the small offspring outwitted or triumphed over the male.

Yem twined with Rabor. "You deceived me," he tingled. "There are two worlds, are there not?"

"No. This is entertainment—make-believe. Fantasies. Men are not allowed to kill one another as individuals, so they enjoy seeing the pretense. Families are not so happily grouped, but it is flattering for them to identify themselves with the images on the screen. And remember, the real underlying purpose of all this is to incite the viewer to consume more natural resources. But wait—you wished to learn about *music*. And that, I believe, is about to be presented now. Ah, yes!"

The figure flickered forth, gyrating with a guitar. And then the sound came.

"Yem!" Rabor grinded. "What is wrong?"

Yem writhed in agony. "No!" he squiggled. "No—stop—"

A twiddle of tentacles and the set went off.

"Thank you," Yem fleched, weakly. "I do not believe I could have endured another moment. So that is *music*." He pulsed wearily. "Now I can believe you. Men are irrational beings indeed. They detest their very natures, they abhor one another, they distort everything in their lives. Is there nothing they hold sacred?"

"One thing only," Rabor vi-

brated. "The symbol of power. I will show you. Usually this symbol is carefully concealed, but I know where it is hidden."

He flowed over to the wall, parting a drape with a tentacle and grasping the knob of a safe until attuned with the combination. The safe swung open and Rabor scooped out the contents.

"Here," he throbbed. "This is what men want."

"But these are only little pieces of green parchment."

"They are covered with words and pictures. Are they not interesting?"

"Interesting, perhaps. But of no value."

"No value at all," Rabor pulsed. "Come, shall we go back?"

And they vaulted off into the night.

THE END

PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE SPACE AGE

What part will the camera play in discovering the secrets of the Earth and our Universe? Who are today's space photographers? Can the camera help us predict the weather? Lloyd Maffan, one of the nation's top science writers, answers these questions and many more

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PHOTOGRAPHY



THE NON-EXISTENT MAN

By WYNNE WHITEFORD

ILLUSTRATOR VARGA

What man can imagine, man can do. You've heard that before, but the complications that would result from man's ability to tamper with time are endless and fascinating. In this time travel yarn Mark Fallon proves how quickly Man would wreck the universe if he had a chance.

MARK! I don't want you to go through with it!"

"What?" By the door, Mark Fallon turned. With two long strides he crossed to the table, putting his brief case on it. As he looked down at his wife, his black brows met in a single heavy bar across his pale face.

He put his hands on her shoulders. "Ria, we've been through this a hundred times. Tonight will be the last time I have free access to the laboratory."

"I don't want you to do it. I'm frightened!"

He shook her slightly, smiling with his mouth but not with his eyes. "I'm running no risk. We know the time-disk works. We've had it back much further into the past than the time I'm aiming for. Neither Jennison nor I have ever got out of it—

that's all. But there was nothing to stop us stepping out into the world of any past time—nothing, that is, but Jennison's superstitious fear of changing the course of events." His lips twisted. "As if they couldn't be better."

"But it's such a terrible period you're going back to. Those newspapers in the library—murder and shooting on nearly every page."

Mark gave a confident laugh. He took the revolver out of his pocket and weighed it in his hand, sighting at a point on the wall.

"Put that away!" Her voice was high and shaky. "It's barbaric."

"Probably not one chance in a thousand I'll have to use it. But I feel safer with it. Listen! I'll be in that period only one-



Would death be final in this unreal world?

hundred minutes. Just long enough to find John, deliver the photographs, and come away."

"What if he thinks they're faked?"

"He won't. Why d'you think I picked him, out of all my ancestors?"

"Because you've got his diary. He's the only one you know where to find."

"Well—partly that, yes. But more than that, because he had brains. He was an inventor. Not a great inventor, perhaps, but there are still a couple of electronic gadgets named after him."

Ria was silent, troubled. "But—you don't know what effect you'll have on *today*, giving him the plans of inventions before their time."

Mark flung his arms wide. "It's not long before their time. Damn it, it doesn't matter whether the antigravity field is invented by Cranston in 1996 or by my great-great-grandfather in about 1959 or '60. The same with all the other things." He laughed. "He'll know how to use the stuff. He was bright. Remember, he left quite a fortune—not that any of it came down to me. But this should give him the greatest fortune any man ever had—and there should be plenty left over for me, and for you. If there isn't, I suppose I'll just have to go back again, but we'll worry about that when we come to it."

He picked up the brief case again. "There's no reason why

it shouldn't work. It's got to work. With enough money, I could be running the whole project, not Jennison." Suddenly he grinned. "See you later. I've got a long way to go. A hundred and thirty-seven years each way."

"For heaven's sake be careful," she called after him as he strode out.

He landed his air-car close to the laboratory, walked along in the dark, and let himself in with his key. He didn't turn any lights on until he was in the windowless inner room with the time-disk.

It was partly an aircraft, because it would be necessary at times to maneuver in space to some extent before making a landing in a past period of time. It had a circular cabin with round port-holes, surrounded by a broad circular flange which contained the time-distortion coils. Beneath were three rounded projections of the anti-gravity thrust-units which lifted it, similar to those used on an air-car. He pressed the button which slid back the laboratory roof, exposing the dark, star-flecked sky.

He entered the cabin of the disk, and carefully set the dials to the date on which his great-great-grandfather's diary had recorded a quiet, uninterrupted evening at his apartment—March 13, 1958. One hundred and thirty-seven years ago. He started the generators. On the

antigrav drive, he lifted a thousand, three-thousand, ten-thousand feet into the night air, and then he hovered. He set the emergence-point at 2120 hours, and sent the current flowing through the coils. He threw in the activating switch, and the tremendous force of the temporal-distortion field flowed through him. . . .

A different landscape was suddenly below him. Still a city, but with dim spots of light along narrow streets. He compared it with the photograph of the old map he had copied in the library, and sent the disk skimming horizontally across the river. He wondered if anyone below had noticed it. It didn't matter—in those days, the newspapers often carried reports of strange things seen in the sky.

He picked up his co-ordinates, and lowered the disk on its anti-gravs into a vacant lot near a gaunt iron structure that appeared to be some form of elevated railroad. He took his brief case, set the disk's controls to return on automatic to the laboratory at Time Zero plus ten seconds, then to return exactly to this point at 2300 hours—one hundred minutes from now. He got out quickly, dropping to the bare ground and moving away as the disk flicked out of sight.

He looked about him. A train thundered along the elevated railroad, its long line of yellow-lit windows showing strangely attired people within. He watch-

ed it out of sight, then walked rapidly towards the street, passing through a gap in a line of straggling bushes.

He looked tensely in each direction, his mind filled with mental pictures of the newspaper headlines in the ancient papers of the period—a man shot in the street, another held up and robbed somewhere else. As Ria had said, it was a barbaric time.

He began to run along the asphalt sidewalk.

"Hey!" called a voice nearby. From the corner of his eye, he saw a figure emerge from the shadows where the bushes grew thickly.

He whirled. The other man was about his own build, similarly dressed, and in his hand was a revolver! Mark's own gun seemed to leap into his hand. He hadn't time to feel fear. The other man moved forward, his face shadowed, menacing.

Mark's gun spat orange flame into the gloom, once, twice. The other man spun with the impact of the bullets against chest and shoulder, sprawling to the ground. His hands clawed forward to the edge of the asphalt.

Mark ran, flashing beneath a street-lamp and pounding on into the dark. There was the taste of metal in his mouth. He wished the incident hadn't happened, but he couldn't afford complications. If he were held, questioned, he could miss the return of the time-disk. He would

be trapped in this hideous, violent world of the past for the rest of his life.

He was still running when he reached the street where his great-great-grandfather, John Fallon, had his apartment. Not ten minutes after leaving the disk, he found the right building.

He was glad of the chance to regain some of his breath as he scanned the names on the mailboxes. There it was—J. A. Fallon, Apartment 3B. He pressed the button beneath it, and a moment later a buzzer shrilled. He opened the inner door, and walked up to the third floor, the muscles at the backs of his legs trembling slightly from the unaccustomed effort of climbing stairs.

The door of apartment 3B was open, with yellowish light flooding out into the passage, and a dark, slim man of medium height stood looking at him. He was quite young. It gave Mark a feeling of incongruity, somehow, to find his great-great-grandfather a young man—but of course, in this year he would be only twenty-two.

"John Fallon?" he asked.

"That's right."

"I'm a relation of yours—Mark. We haven't met before."

The young man gripped his hand, looking at him searchingly. "Are you sure? Didn't know I had a relation called Mark. Come in, anyhow."

The room had queer, old-

fashioned wooden furniture. A shaded standard-lamp threw soft yellow light near the single table. Mark sat down, and the younger man moved across to a chest-of-drawers with bottles and glasses on top of it.

"Care for a drink?"

"No, thanks. I haven't much time." Mark was aware of the fact that John was looking at his clothes, particularly at his shoes.

"Just how are we related?"

Mark hesitated, looking at his watch. 2140 hours—twenty of his hundred minutes gone already. "You might find this hard to take, at first. I'm your great-great-grandson — actually, I think it may be great-great-great-grandson. The point is, I've come back in time from the year Twenty-ninety-five. That is, from a hundred and thirty-seven years in your future."

John stared at him without speaking. Suddenly he laughed. "Okay. But I think I asked a reasonable question. Just how are we related?"

Mark frowned. "I'm serious. Look here, you keep a diary, don't you?"

"What if I do?"

Mark took the photographs from his brief case, and selected one, looking at it. "Yesterday, you wrote in that diary 'Received check from P. Stoddard, \$52.00.' Today, you wrote, or will write, 'Had lunch with Mae. Phone Andrews 2:30.' Right?"

John's face was white. He took a tense step forward. "Say —what the hell is this?"

Mark held up his hand. "Tomorrow, you're going to write 'Called on Andrews 11 a.m.'"

"Tomorrow? What d'you mean, *tomorrow*?"

Mark handed him the photograph of the two open pages of the diary. John took it. His eyes went wide. He walked across to a writing desk, and took out the very diary Mark had so often held in his hands—only now it was crisp and almost new, not faded, battered, patched with tape as Mark knew it. John Fallon spread it out on the table beneath the light, holding the photograph beside it, his eyes travelling from one to the other.

He looked at them for a long time, leaning shakily on the table with both hands. "But how—" He lifted his eyes to Mark's. "Look! Am I going mad?"

Mark shook his head. "Just a demonstration. I've come to help you."

John walked staggeringly across to the chest-of-drawers and poured himself a drink, the neck of the bottle rattling against the glass. He drank quickly, his dilated eyes on Mark.

"You see," said Mark, "I'm speaking the truth. I've come back a hundred and thirty-seven years to help you." He spread some of the other photographs across the table. "Since you were the most promising of my ancestors—you have quite a career ahead of you as an in-

ventor, you know—I decided to give you some help. Not from pure altruism, I admit. You made a moderate fortune, but not enough for it to survive to my generation. If you were to make a really gigantic fortune —are you listening?"

"Go ahead."

"Here are several ways you can do it. First, these copies of articles in technical journals published in 1997, 2014, 2029—all detailed stuff on ion-drive for space-flight, antigravity fields, electron-shields—but I'll leave it to you to work out the details. There are some simpler devices here that can be real money-spinners—and to get you started, some papers from nearer your own day. These stock-market reports—one for next week, and others scattered over weeks, months, years. And a map of a uranium mine that wouldn't otherwise be discovered until 1988—there's nothing to prevent you—"

"Stop it! Stop it!" John strode to the door and threw it open. "It's impossible! It's madness! What are you? Some kind of demon? Get out!"

Mark lifted his hand. "Wait a minute—"

"It isn't true!" John's face was ashen. "None of this is true. I don't know what your game is, but I've a damned good mind to lock you in here and—"

Mark didn't hear the rest. Lock him in? With the disk returning at 2300 hours? He sprang to his feet.

"Come away from that door." He drew the gun. John froze. "Close the door. Right. Now, over there."

John moved warily round the room. As he passed the chest-of-drawers he exploded into lightning movement. Mark saw a bottle flying through the air, ducked, heard its splintering crash against the wall behind his head. Then John Fallon was on him. He got his hand on the gun, and they grappled.

The lamp smashed to the floor, and the darkness closed in on them like a sack. Mark was bigger, but the younger man's frenzy multiplied his strength. As they struggled in the darkness a shot crashed with an instant of flame like a photo-flash. John's grip relaxed, and he sprawled against Mark's legs.

Mark put the gun in his pocket. He staggered against the table, the sweat stinging his eyes. He found his little pocket-lamp and switched it on.

"Lord!" He turned the sprawling figure over. The eyes stared up at him, their pupils differently dilated. John Fallon, his ancestor, was dead.

Dead. Mark stood upright. According to the diary, he had married at 35, and his first son had been born when he was 37. Yet he was dead, now, at the age of 22.

He heard voices somewhere in the building, and his immediate preservation claimed his attention. He locked the door,

opened the window. An iron fire-escape zig-zagged down the back of the place. Within minutes, he was back at the vacant lot.

The man he had shot was still lying there, half-hidden by the bushes and the shadows. Two men he had killed, within less than an hour. Worst of all, he had killed his own ancestor—killed him before he had fathered any children. Theoretically, that meant—What did it mean? Did it mean he should never have been born? . . . He shivered.

He thought the disk would never arrive. He waited, waited, waited, with a chill, void horror within him.

At last, the disk was there. He sprang into it and immediately climbed on the antigrav for a thousand feet. He hovered, then threw in the switch that cut the time-distortion field. As the vast force was withdrawn, the disk snapped back into its own time.

Within minutes, the bright lights of the laboratory were blazing coldly about him again. He climbed out, his knees almost buckling beneath him. He looked around at the familiar benches. Had someone been in here? Things looked just slightly different, although he couldn't at first put his finger on the difference. But he could when he turned around to look at the new rack of shelves he had installed last week.

It wasn't there. In its place

was a pile of packing-cases, and a strange drilling machine. The familiar drilling machine he had installed a month ago was gone from its place across the room.

What had happened? An icy, quavering fear began within him.

He switched off the lights and the power, and let himself out, walking to where he had left his car. It was not there. He found the exact spot where he had left it, but couldn't even see the impressions it must have left in the ground.

His heart thudded heavily. He began walking. It was only a mile to his home, but it seemed to take him a long time to get there. When he reached his house, the thudding of his heart was pounding in his eardrums.

It was the same house he had left two hours ago—yet it had been painted a different color. And a complex metal trelliswork had been built at the side—trelliswork overgrown with ivy that must have been there for years. Reeling a little, he walked up the drive.

Would there be any change in Ria? He tried to open the door, but his key didn't seem to fit. As he was struggling with it, a light flashed on above him and the door opened. A blonde, Teutonic-looking woman he had never seen before peered out at him.

"What is it?" she demanded.

"Er—is Mrs. Fallon in?"

"No one of that name about here."

"Sorry. I—ah—just moved into the neighborhood. Must have the wrong house."

He could almost feel the woman's eyes on him as he went away. She didn't shut the door until he had turned the corner of the street.

He walked along two blocks to the air-car park. At least, this looked familiar. There seemed to be no change in anything, although when he looked where he usually kept his car he saw another one in its place. Tom Bryan sat in his little office, the light pouring down on his half-bald scalp. Mark walked up and pushed in through the door.

"Hi, Tom."

A blank, questioning gaze met him—hesitant, explorative. "Hi. Have we met?"

"You remember me, Tom. Mark—Mark Fallon."

Tom's forehead corrugated. "Can't recall. But I see a lot of people. What can I do for you, Mr. Farron?"

"Is my bus here? A blue and white '93 Kesarc." He hesitated as the other man's frown deepened. "I—er—thought my wife might have left it here."

"Sorry, Mr. Farron. Try Gianetti's three blocks down."

Mark was glad to get away. The blood thundered in his temples. God, this was his world, his town—the place where he had lived for years. Yet it was as if he'd never been here.

He found a public visiphone booth, and flicked through the

directory. His name wasn't in it. Neither was his brother's. He turned to another directory covering the area across the river, where his parents lived. The print blurred and danced on the pages, and he lit a cigarette with shaking hands before he tried to look for his father's name. When he didn't find it, he stared stupidly up and down the columns of names that seemed to pulse in and out of focus with the thud, thud, thud, thud of the blood in his skull.

Then in this world which he, himself, had changed, he had never lived. His father had never lived . . . He looked across the street, at the street-lamp shining on the green foliage of a tree. It was solid enough, solid and real, the street, the houses, the parked air-cars, all of it. The people he had known, his neighbors, his school-friends, even Ria—wherever she was—they were all living in it, yet to them he was a stranger, a phantom from nowhere. . . .

His school-friends! Peter Barkly—he was the fellow he knew better than any, from school-days up through the University to adult life. He turned again to the directory.

Barkly, Peter E. He dialed the number, pushing the door of the booth open with his foot so that the cool air reached his face. The sweat was like ice on his forehead.

Barkly's face appeared on the screen, expectant, unrecognizing.

"Peter, I'm Mark Fallon. Remember me at school?"

"Can't say I place you. You must have changed a lot."

"Remember, I used to go around with a girl called Ria Walton."

"Ria Walton? Oh, sure. I remember her well. She's married now, you know. Married a guy called Wilson, or Williams, or something like that. Lives out on the West Coast. Got a couple of fine kids—we called on them last June. . . ."

Mark walked out of the booth and strode aimlessly down the street. He kept on walking like a machine. Occasionally people passed him, one of them a neighbor, but the man glanced at him without a spark of recognition. It would be the same wherever he went—no one would ever know him. They couldn't know him. He had never lived in their world.

Suddenly he stopped in mid-stride. There was a way out!

Fool, that he hadn't thought of it at once. He had gone back 137 years, landing the time-disk at his chosen co-ordinates at 2120 hours, March 13, 1958. Within an hour of that point in time, he had killed his ancestor, changing the following 137 years in such a way that neither he nor his direct ancestors had been born. But why not go back in the disk again, and stop the change from happening?

He was running towards the laboratory before the thought

was fully formed. It was ridiculously simple. All he had to do was go back to that same evening in 1958, just before his first moment of arrival, and stop himself from seeing his great-great-grandfather.

He was breathing heavily as he re-entered the time-disk, but there was intense, profound hope within him.

To hell with the fortune! Once you started to change things in the past, you had no idea where the different chains of cause and effect would lead. He'd stop himself, explain things to himself, then return. The world would remain as he had known it.

He set the co-ordinates for the same point in space, and the time of emergence at 2100 hours. He checked everything meticulously, double-checked it, triple-checked it. He sent the power humming through the coils. Aloft, he threw the switch and felt again the vast surge of power of the time-distortion field. . . .

He maneuvered the disk over the same dark, vacant lot where he had landed before—or, rather, where he was to make his first landing in twenty minutes' time. 2100 hours. He set the return emergence for 2150 hours, then sprang out, running across towards the dark tangle of bushes as the disk flicked out of sight.

He kept looking at his watch. The night seemed the same as when he had been here before. He looked about, feeling the gun

in his pocket. He must keep a lookout for the man who had sprung at him from the bushes the first time. He could see no-one about.

A train thundered along the elevated railroad behind the lot. He watched its yellow-lit windows racing past, and then, from the corner of his eye, he saw something else.

The disk—just flicking out of sight as he looked at it. It had come and gone while he had been intent on his search of the bushes. At that rate—

He heard running footsteps. A man raced past him through the gloom, head down. It looked like—*It was!*

"Hey!" he shouted. Involuntarily, he jumped forward.

The figure whirled, and as the light fell on it Mark found himself looking into his own face. He hardly recognized the fear, the tense determination in it. The gun spat orange flame into the gloom, once, twice.

He tried to scream as the bullets smashed like hammer-blows into his chest and shoulder, spinning him to the ground. His hands clawed to the edge of the asphalt.

With blurring, fading vision he saw the running figure flash beneath the street-lamp and pound on into the dark.

Then he could see nothing . . . The blood was hot and salt in his mouth. . . .

THE END

THE HALF PAIR

By

BERTRAM

CHANDLER

This flight was evidently marked for disaster. But after all, a man can't be well dressed in space with only one cuff link.

NOTHING," he said, "is more *infuriating* than a half pair of anything."

"I've said that I'm sorry," she replied, in a tone of voice that implied that she wasn't. "But you're making such a *fuss* about it. Who gave them to you? Some blonde?"

"I gave them to myself," he replied sulkily. "It so happened that the need for a decent pair of cuff links coincided with my having enough money to buy them. I've had them for years . . ."

"And you were very attached to them," she said. "Don't cry. Mummy will buy you a new pair when we get back to civilization."

"I want a pair *now*," he said sulkily.

"But why?" she asked, genuinely puzzled. "We're alone to-

gether in this tub of ours, half way between the Asteroid Belt and Mars, and you have this insane desire for a pair of cuff links . . ."

"We agreed," he said stiffly, "that we weren't going to let ourselves lapse, get sloppy, the way that some prospecting couples do. You must remember those dreadful people we met on PX173A—the ones who asked us to dinner aboard their ship. He dressed in greasy coveralls, she in what looked like a converted flour sack . . . The drinks straight from the bottle, and the food straight from the can . . ."

"That," she told him, "was an extreme case."

"Admittedly. And my going around with my shirt sleeves rolled up, or flapping, would be the thin end of the wedge." He brooded. "What I can't get over

is the *clottishness* of it all. I go through into the bathroom to rinse out my shirt. I leave the cuff links on the ledge over the basin while I put the shirt on the stretcher to dry. Picking up the cuff links, to transfer them to a clean shirt, I drop one into the basin. It goes down the drain. I hurry to the engine-room to get a spanner to open the pipe at the U bend. I return to find you filling the basin to wash your smalls. I tell you what's happened—and you promptly pull out the plug, washing the link over and past the bend . . ."

"I wanted to see," she said.

"You wanted to see," he mimicked. He brooded some more. "It wouldn't be so bad if this were one of the old-fashioned ships working on an absolutely closed cycle. All that I'd have to do would be to take the plumbing adrift foot by foot until I found my cuff link. But with more water than we can possibly use as a by-product of the Halvorsen Generator, and all our waste automatically shot out into space . . ."

"Anyone would think," she said, "that you'd lost the Crown Jewels."

"My cuff links," he said, "mean at least as much to me as the Crown Jewels mean to the Empress."

"I've told you," she flared, "that I'll buy you another pair!"

"But they won't be the same," he grumbled.

"Where are you going?" she demanded.

"To the control room," he answered briefly.

"To sulk?"

"No," he said. "No, my dear. No."

She lost her temper when the tangential rockets flared briefly to kill the rotation of the ship around her longitudinal axis. She was in the galley at the time, preparing spaghetti for dinner. Spaghetti and Free Fall don't mix—or they mix all too well. She did not wait to clean the clinging, viscous strands from her face and hair, but went straight to the control room, pulling herself along the guide rails with a skill that she had not been aware that she possessed.

"You . . . You butterfly-brained ape!" she snarled. "Since when can I do without gravity—even though it is only centrifugal force—in the galley? You've ruined dinner."

"I," he said proudly, "have found my cuff link. You know how the garbage ejection system works—all waste is flung out tangentially, by centrifugal force, at right angles to the line of flight. There was, I thought, just the smallest chance that anything metallic would show up on the screen, especially if I killed the ship's rotation. I stepped up the gain and the sensitivity, too."

"So?" she demanded. "So?"

"There it is," he said, point-

ing happily to the beam bearing fluorescent screen that circled the control room. "Do you see it—that little blip that could be a tiny satellite. It is a tiny satellite, come to that . . ."

"So you know where it is," she said. "Just three hundred meters away, and spiralling outwards all the time. And for this piece of quite useless knowledge you've ruined dinner."

"It's *not* useless knowledge. What do you think we carry spacesuits for?"

"You aren't going out," she said. "Surely you aren't. Even you couldn't be such a fool."

"Just because *you*," he replied, "happen to have a phobia about spacesuits . . ."

"And whose fault was it that the air tank was three-quarters empty?" she asked.

"Yours," he said. "Everybody knows that whoever is wearing a suit is supposed to make a personal check of every item of equipment before going Outside . . ."

"Some women," she said, "are fools enough to trust their husbands. They're the ones who haven't learned the hard way, the same as I did."

"Some men," he replied, "are fools enough to kid themselves that their wives have an elementary knowledge of plumbing." He gestured towards the screen. "There's my cuff link—and I'm going after it."

"You'll never find it," she said.

"Of course I shall. I'll have

my reaction unit with me, as well as a lifeline. I'll push straight off from the ship, from the airlock—it's only a couple of meters forward from the scuppers. Then you'll be watching the screen, and you'll talk me into a position where I shall intersect the orbit of the cuff link."

"You don't really mean it," she said. "You must be insane—completely insane."

"No more insane than you were when you pulled out that plug. Less so."

"But . . . But anything might happen. And you know that I can't wear a suit again, that I can't come out after you, until I've been reconditioned . . ."

"Nothing will happen," he told her. "Just you sit and watch the screen and talk me into position. It's the least you can do."

He pulled his spacesuit out of its locker, began to zipp and buckle himself into the clumsy garment.

He should have known better. He should have considered the fact that the rules made by the Interplanetary Transport Commission are wise ones, and that Rule No. 11a is no exception. "No person," it reads, "shall venture into space from his ship unless accompanied by a shipmate." The Rules, admittedly, are all very well for big ships swarming with almost redundant personnel—but the skipper-owners of the little Asteroid

Prospectors who ignore them rarely live to a ripe old age.

Unlike his wife, he had never had any trouble with spacesuits—and this, perhaps, made him careless. He hung motionless on the end of his lifeline waiting for the first instructions to come through his helmet phone. They came at last, grudgingly.

"Aft two meters . . . Hold it! Out a meter!"

His reaction pistol flared briefly.

He saw the cuff link sailing towards him then—a tiny, gold speck gleaming in the sunlight. He laughed. He stretched out both hands to catch it—then realized that one of them was holding the pistol, his right hand, the hand with which he would have to grab the little trinket as it passed. He tried to transfer the pistol to his left hand and, in his haste, let go of it. It sailed away into the emptiness.

What does it matter? he thought. It's covered by insurance, but my cuff links aren't.

"Got it!" he shouted into his helmet microphone.

The return to the ship would be easy—all that he would have to do would be to haul himself in on the lifeline. It was then that he made the discovery that drove the jubilation from his mind. Somehow—it must have been when he dropped the pistol—the line had parted; the Asteroid Prospectors are notorious for their cheap, secondhand gear. Slowly he was drifting

away from the ship. There was nothing that he could throw against the direction of drift to check himself—nothing, that is, except the solitary cuff link, and its mass, he knew, was too small to have any appreciable effect.

"What's wrong?" asked his wife sharply.

"Nothing," he lied.

She'll never get into a spacesuit while she has her phobia, he thought. And even if she does—it'll be too risky. There's no sense in both of us getting lost. Good-bye, he thought. Good-bye, my darling. It's been good knowing you. Sell the ship and get back to Earth . . .

"What's wrong?" she asked again, sharply.

"Nothing," he gasped—and knew that even though the gauge on his tank had registered the full twelve hundred pounds there was nothing like that pressure in actuality.

"There is something wrong!"

"Yes," he admitted. "Promise me one thing—when you get back to Mars demand a survey of all the equipment sold by Sorensen, the ship chandler. And . . . And . . ." He was fighting for breath, holding off unconsciousness. "It was all my fault. And look after yourself. Look after yourself—not me . . ."

He fainted.

He was surprised when he awoke in his bunk. He was surprised that he awoke at all. Her

(Continued on page 40)

THE BODY BANK

By

DR. ARTHUR BARRON

Startling advances in the field of surgery have become almost a cliche. But are many of us aware of how far these advances have actually carried? To a point, it appears where comparative immortality is not impossible. In this article, Dr. Barron reports on some of the aspects of this subject—particularly upon the "spare parts" of the human body that are being made available to surgeons.

IN THE same way that the corner gas station keeps on hand replacements for your car, hospitals will one day stock a full line of spare parts for your body. Eventually, your surgeon will be able to prescribe a new liver for you as readily as your mechanic orders a new carburetor. That time is not too far off, either. Today, a number of basic human parts are already available.

Blood

Transfusion experiments began in the 17th Century. In 1667 the court physician to Louis XIV transferred 300cc of blood from a lamb to a sedan-chair carrier (who died after complaining of a "warm sensation"!). With Landsteiner's dis-

covey of blood groups in 1900 transfusions became fully practical. Last year doctors ordered an estimated 5 million transfusions. Whole blood can be stored for 21 days. Freeze-dried vacuum packed plasma can be kept for years. The major problem in blood banking is virus contamination. No reliable method of sterilization has yet been developed. During the Korean war about 20% of the patients receiving pooled plasma became infected.

Corneas

Transplantation of human tissue was successfully launched in 1906. In that year the German physician Zirn transplanted human corneas from the eyes of the dead to the living. Last year 682 corneas were

donated to the Eyebank for Sight Restoration Inc., in New York alone.

Doctors distinguish between autografts and homografts in tissue transplantation. The latter refer to transplants made from one person to another; the former to transplants of tissue from one part of a person's own body to another part of his body. Autografts are invariably more successful than homografts.

Bone

Bone and cartilage banking began about a decade ago. Bone is often ground into "burger," stored, and used when needed to fill internal bone cavities caused by disease. Cartilage is diced into cubes and used for joint surfaces. Lengths of bone proper are used by surgeons as "scaffolding" for the formation of new bone. Recently, it has become possible to store bones almost indefinitely by a freeze-drying method in which bone is frozen and dehydrated under high vacuum, then kept in vacuum tubes at room temperature.

Skin

Banked human skin is the best burn dressing there is. Skin homografts die and slough off within 10 to 30 days of transplantation, but they are an indispensable aid in getting seriously burned patients

through the critical period. New micro-dissection techniques and storage procedures now make it possible to grow and preserve whole sheets of skin from single cells. Such sheets, folded surface to surface in saline absorption gauze sponges, have been sent air mail by banks to physicians needing them for emergencies. Skin can be taken from corpses even several days after death, provided the body has been refrigerated.

Arteries

After 50 years of experimentation with animals, the first successful human transplant of an artery was achieved in 1948 in a child born with a vascular defect. Because artery transplants permit normal circulation, amputations become unnecessary in more than 20% of the cases in which they might otherwise have to be made. Patients suffering from severe arteriosclerosis are given a new lease on life from such transplants. The aorta, the principal blood vessel leading away from the heart, is the one primarily used by surgeons.

Organs

Transplants have proven successful only temporarily to date with humans, though they work out much better with animals. Recently, researchers have successfully taken ovar-

ian tissue from one monkey and transplanted it under the muscle of another from a different species. The tissue has survived seven months and is still producing sex hormones. Quick frozen lungs have been successfully transplanted for as long as 30 days between canine litter mates.

Progress has also been made in transplantation of organs with humans. Recently, a patient with total malfunction of kidneys was kept alive for 50 days through a full kidney transplant. More interesting was the case of the patient who had kidney tissue inserted just under his thigh, the renal vessels being connected to the femoral. For five and a half months this tissue secreted urine to the surface of the thigh, increasing the patient's waste disposal capacity by about 10%. Very good experience has also been had with embryonic endocrine tissue. Persons deficient in thyroid and parathyroid glands, for example, have been helped by grafts of tissue taken from embryos or still borns. From Russia come reports of successful transplants in the repair of a damaged penis. Articles indicate that micturition is satisfactory and that erectile ability has been restored.

Immunity

Before the bright promise of body replacement can be fully

realized, however, considerable basic research remains to be done. As matters now stand medicine is frustrated by the presence of what researchers term "actively acquired immunity." This is the sensitivity which the body acquires to foreign tissue. It is the reaction which prevents most homografts from "taking," which causes them to die and slough off or, as in the case with muscle, to be replaced by useless connective tissue from the host body. The human system, it is obvious, develops antibodies to foreign protein and rejects it after a time. That this immunity is acquired has been demonstrated experimentally. Thus, homografts have been shown to be rejected quicker on second or third grafting than on first. Evidence indicates that it is body lymphocytes (a form of white blood corpuscle) which act as the main sensitizing agents.

Interestingly, the problem of immunity is not encountered with plant life, nor with animals far lower down on the phylogenetic scale. It seems to be the case that the more highly specialized the tissue in question, the less likely it will "take" in grafting.

Research Leads

Several research leads are being followed up in an attempt to solve this major problem. Some of these show real prom-

ise. Compatibility studies suggest that tissue types exist in the same sense as blood types. Identical twins, for example, provide no immunity problem. Homografts take readily with such people. There is a case on record in which ear tissue has been grafted from one twin to another with permanent survival. Recently, researchers have indicated that as many as 23 skin types may exist. Once the various types have been correctly identified and isolated, transplantation should become much easier.

Treating tissues before grafting also offers promise. To date, irradiation, cortisone applications, freezing, and heating of tissue has been tried with varying success. Best luck has been had with repeated graftings, however. In this procedure transplanted skin was made to take on animals for startlingly long periods of time by removing it from the receiving animal after four days and transferring it to a second, third, and fourth animal. If left on the first animal, the graft would stay alive only about nine days; but after several transplants, its life was extended about a month. Moreover, blood circulation was improved with each transfer. It is as though the graft loses its "individuality," gets rid of antibodies, by being transferred.

Most hopeful of all is the work being done with "enabling

substance." ES was discovered in 1956. It promises to break the barrier to transplantation. It is formed in mice blood and tissue. When ES is injected into mice, tissues then grafted on to mice survive and grow, but without ES injections mice invariably produce antibodies which destroy the graft. ES seems to inhibit lymphocytes and is probably found in every individual. When scientists isolate and learn to use it with humans, it should go a long way to solving the problem of acquired immunity. Radioactive tracers are proving extremely useful in such research at the present time.

Next of Kin

A major social problem yet to be solved concerns the legal restrictions surrounding the use of cadavers for body banks. Today, even though a person wills his eyes or other parts of his body to a bank, permission must still be obtained from next of kin after death. Moreover, permission must be obtained within hours in some cases if vital tissues are to prove useful. Often banks are not located in the cities where death occurs, though. Besides, grieving relatives are in no mood to get a call from a physician asking if he can "carve up" their loved one. Until some better arrangements are worked out, body bank work will suffer.

Ex Morte Vita

"From the Dead—Life!" This is the motto of the tissue bank at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Md. It is the largest and best tissue bank in the nation. Though its primary purpose is research, it serves patients at the Naval Hospital and ships tissue elsewhere.

Tissue is taken from those who die at the hospital. The postmortem operation is an elaborate one and takes more than 14 hours to complete. Teams of surgeons, nurses, and corpsmen are used. In a typical operation about a dozen complete changes of clothing, drapes, gloves and masks are made.

Extreme emphasis is placed on septic conditions. One subject yields about 125 specimens of tissue. The bank

has been in existence about eight years.

Unfortunately, few other complete banks exist. The field of transplantation surgery is much too new. It was not until 1953, for example, that a professional bulletin devoted exclusively to problems of tissue transplantation was begun. There is also the problem of the conceptual difficulties involved in the field. Like advances in knowledge about cancer, transplantation work depends on a full understanding of the basic dynamics of cell behavior, of the basic processes of life itself.

But these problems are being attacked vigorously. Today, surgery stands on the threshold of a dazzling new era in which it may well be possible to replace all the parts of the human body, to build—as it were—new people out of old.

THE HALF PAIR

(Continued from page 35)

face was the first thing that he saw—tear stained it was, and dirty—and happy. He saw then what she was holding—a clean, white, glistening shirt and, at the end of each sleeve, there were gleaming cuff links.

"You came outside," he said softly. "You brought me in . . .

But your phobia, darling . . . Your spacesuit phobia . . ."

"I found," she said, "that I have an even stronger one. It's the same as yours." She bent down to kiss him. "I do so hate half a pair of anything—and I don't mean only cuff links!"

THE END

THE SPECTROSCOPE

by S. E. COTTS

THREE TIMES INFINITY. Edited by Leo Margulies. 176 pp. Gold Medal Books. Paper: 35¢.

This a collection of three novelettes by some of the outstanding authors in science fictiondom—Bradbury & Brackett, Sturgeon, and Heinlein. One would naturally expect such a mouth-watering treat to be a complete delight from cover to cover. Unfortunately this is not the case; the Bradbury story is a great disappointment. This is an example of his early work, and the singing prose of the mood piece that is his hallmark today was not yet in evidence. Instead we have a melodrama. This may possibly be of some historical interest, but the editor has done Mr. Bradbury a disservice by including his story in a volume with two such finished pieces as Sturgeon's *The Golden Helix* and Heinlein's *Destination Moon*.

These are two judicious choices for the collection. Each is fine in itself; taken together they are representative examples of two approaches to science fiction. Heinlein's is a picture of the first flight to the moon, filled with difficulties of a very believable nature: government red tape, a lukewarm public, scientists with conflicting loyalties. In view of the imminence of space travel, the book should be of vital current interest. It is also, however, a fine suspense story.

Sturgeon's is the opposite, a strange, beautiful, and somewhat frightening vision of an evolution that goes backward not forward—not our idea of monkeys to men, but men back to animals and then plants and then seeds. Taking the story out of context like this, may take away from Sturgeon's imaginative concepts, it may sound like a horror story. This is not so because the ideas, though alien to anything I have read in S-F, are expressed with a compassion rare in any kind of fiction today.

THE SHROUDED PLANET. By Robert Randall. 188 pp. Gnome Press, Inc. \$3.00.

Here is another one of those infuriating books: unusual subject matter, a nice sense of continuity, fluent writing—then—the action is cut off suddenly and half a dozen loose ends are left flapping as we are plunged into an ending that is the last word in abruptness. It almost seems as if the authors (Robert Randall is a pen name for two of them) had made a pact with each other to stop after a certain number of pages. Finding their goal practically on top of them,

they stopped, picked the nearest ending, and literally pasted it on the book.

The story takes us to the planet Nidor, where change and progress were almost unimaginable. All actions found their justification in the Scriptures as interpreted by the Council of Elders. Anything else was taboo. Then the Earthmen arrived, claiming to have come from the Great Light Himself, and insisting that a new and Earth-supervised school was to be established near the Holy City. It was set up, and its influence gradually undermined the economic and social basis of the entire planet.

The book takes us through three generations of Nidorians, from the coming of the Earthmen to the author's stopgap conclusion. This is undoubtedly the reason for the book's failure. No writer could set up the vast problems in this book and then successfully resolve them in under 200 pages. No writer should even try.

THE SURVIVORS. *By Tom Godwin 190 pp. Gnome Press, Inc. \$3.00.*

Gern spy ships ringed Earth; war and defeat were imminent. But thousands of people on Earth were waiting for a chance to slip away unseen and settle in a mineral-rich planet beyond the outermost boundary of the Gern Empire. From this planet, Athena, the colonists hoped to stage a comeback. They were captured by Gerns, however, as they tried to flee through space, and divided into two groups—Acceptables who would be used as slaves, and Rejects who were left to die on Ragnarok, a planet of impossible extremes of heat and cold, Hell Fever, bloodthirsty unicorns. Under these conditions, survival would have been almost impossible for even a well-provisioned expedition.

This novel is a story of how the colonists not only managed to survive, but lived to challenge the Gerns again. It is claimed that this is a big novel, convincingly handling a panorama of events. I did not find this to be the case. The only thing that is large in the book is the time span, as we are taken through two hundred years of Ragnarok descendants. This is a big canvas but the writing is not of a high enough order to fill it. The various offspring pass before our eyes so quickly and superficially that there is no sense of identification with any one person or generation, or even any real concern with the common problem that faces the generations. Though it is a novel of survival and revenge, what comes out of the pages is strangely cold and quite dull.

...OR SO YOU SAY

The readers have censured the editor; which is indeed gratifying because it proves again their loyalty and interest. We started the Monthly Letter Contest with the thought that the idea would be popular but practically all reader-response was negative. Your objections were somewhat varied but boiled down in general to: "We write letters because we want to—because we have something to say. Our interest lies in the magazine, not in prizes." So the editor bows. This will be the last contest issue. We know you'll keep right on firing at us—praise when we merit it, criticism when we deserve it. And thanks sincerely for making your decision clear in the matter of the letter contest. The first three letters, in order, are this month's winners of \$25.00, \$15.00, and \$5.00. Thus ends the ill-fated letter contest.

Dear Editor:

I have been a reader of *Amazing* for about five years and I have almost always been pleased with each issue. I have never sent a letter of any kind to any publishing firm before but after reading "The Sign of the Tiger," I feel that it is necessary that I do. This story is, in my opinion, one of the best that I have ever read and proves once again that the triumph of right over wrong is inevitable. This principle has been a tradition that has stood the test of time since the earliest days of man. I take a particular delight in being able to read stories like this and also it is my belief that stories which deal with automation are extremely thought provoking.

I am a worker and a proud member of a great international union, and I believe that all people have a right to earn their bread. The age of the automatic factory might seem like the promised land to some people but who can deny that those who cannot qualify for the kind of training necessary to work in these factories will not find work?

Our population increases every day and more and more people are looking for employment. As far as I am concerned automation is evil and wrong and I would like to see a story printed that could make the thousands of working people who read your books see what a bill of goods some people are selling them when they read of the coming age of push button production. Some people think I

am a pessimist but I have to see things as they are and I see people out of jobs now and if factories displace more and more workers and increase the number of job seekers it is only obvious what will happen. I do not believe that goods produced by automation are cheap and I realize that this is a controversial subject but I think that you would be doing a great service if a so-called pessimistic science fiction story of automation is printed.

Dan T. Rozman
2124 Log St.
Calumet, Mich.

• *This point of view is as old as the first labor-saving invention, and the problem is far too broad to be covered in a few lines. But perhaps it can be said that the dangers Mr. Rozman outlines may lie in the transitions rather than in the overall continuity of industrial evolution. Certainly any argument against automation cannot be localized. We cannot say the steam engine was good but the cotton gin not so. We cannot say the modern automobile is a fine thing but weaving should still be done on the hand loom. And who would want to change the modern worker's lot for the comparative slavery of a scant century ago, not to mention the twelve-hour, seven-day drudgery of earlier times? Progress goes forward by its own authority. In a sense, it asks permission of no one just as a forest asks no permission to grow. But the transitions from one era to another—the resulting disruptions—while having been proven temporary can be violent, even bloody. This problem is the ever-present challenge to advancing humanity.*

Dear Editor:

About six months ago I wrote you a letter comparing the *Amazing Stories* you were editing with the science fiction published when Ray Palmer was editor. I am afraid the comparison was most unfavorable to you. Now you seem to be trying to bring back the type of magazine published in those days, and with improvements. You made a big step towards that goal when you resumed publication of the long novels. Your recent announcement of a special Shaver Mystery issue of *Fantastic* is another big step towards that goal.

I have only best wishes for you in regaining the first place that the magazine used to hold. But you still seem to be slightly off the track. I have just read the featured novel of the May issue and it seems to lack something that made the old stories so special. I call it the big concept.

You can't re-read those old stories without realizing all the faults they had. Their characterizations were generally rather poor and certainly not true to life. Many of the stories had loose ends that

were never explained. At times their science bore no resemblance whatsoever to fact. But it didn't matter. They had big ideas that no other type of fiction can have by its very nature. This was what made science fiction so unique.

I imagine you have read book reviews criticizing Doc Smith for the wooden characters of his Lensman epic. Van Vogt never was very realistic about the characters of his Weapon Shop Saga either. And the things said about Shaver are better left without repeating.

But what did it matter when all of these and many others used the whole universe for their background and fitted their heroes and villains into this background to struggle and gain their little victories and defeats. These days everyone is doing just the opposite, making the characters more important than the story. It takes a Heinlein to get away with that and unfortunately there is only one of him.

Your recent story "The Sign of the Tiger" is a good example. Technically it is beautifully written. There is much detail that makes for great realism. But how do you expect anyone to sympathize with a person they dislike so intensely as Julian Bahr? There just isn't enough scope to that story to bring back the old feeling of awe that you could get from the old stories.

It isn't just reminiscenses either of my younger days when I first started reading science fiction. I have re-read those old magazines recently and still get the same feeling as the first time I saw them.

But you are making a good try and I certainly hope you succeed in your aims. I am sure there are many like myself who will support you to the hilt in regaining the stature that *Amazing* once had.

Clayton Hamlin, Jr.
Unity, Maine

• You'll be glad to hear of a new *Amazing* feature in the works, Clayton. It will be called, the "Classic Corner," where we will reprint, each month, a classic story from the nostalgic days you refer to. Of course, it's always been our contention that the nostalgia of tomorrow is being made today; that the classic yarn gets to be classic through a process involving time and memory. But of course many, many of those old stories were great and deserve reprinting. Congratulations on winning second prize.

Dear Editor:

If your new letter contest results in a better letter column, I'm all for it, but it's a shame you had to resort to cash prizes to get good letters. It would seem to indicate that science fiction fans are no longer interested in participating, but would rather be just spectators. And that's a bad sign.

Science fiction, to me, at least, has always been more than just a special kind of reading matter. It's a way of thinking. It requires an imagination that is disciplined, but flexible and unlimited. Science fiction reading is definitely not a passive sport. (My dictionary gives one definition for "passive" as "receiving or enduring without resistance or emotional reaction.") If science fiction produces neither resistance nor emotional reaction, what good is it?

And if it produces one or the other—or both—we should be hearing some sort of repercussions. Time was when the letter columns resounded with some fine discussion of almost any subject under this or any other sun. We argued about anything and everything, and we had fun doing it. Even people who didn't write letters had fun. A good many of my non-fan friends used to drop over just to keep up on the latest feud, argument, discussion, or what-have-you in the letter columns. Some of them got so carried away they read the rest of the magazines and turned fan.

Now, there aren't many letter columns left, and darned few of them contain any discussion, beyond the current issue of the magazine. And even then, it's mostly a case of, "I liked this story (or didn't like this story,) and the cover was lousy (or swell)." That information, I realize, is important to editors, but must they inflict it on their readers? A coupon will give you that information, and leave the letter columns for more important things.

The point I'm trying to make is this: once upon a time, science fiction interested and excited its readers enough to make them comment on it, argue over it, think about it. If we're no longer interested enough, or excited enough to have any reaction at all, then something is missing, either in the science fiction, or in its readers.

So let's go back to the good old practice of saying what we think, loudly, and with vigor. Not just about science fiction itself, but about anything interesting, or unusual, or controversial. Let's debate, argue, fight if we have to. And let's do it with enthusiasm. If we take science fiction out of the spectator-sport category, we'll enjoy it a lot more.

Marian C. Oaks
8219 Belair Road
Lot 89, Road E
Baltimore 6, Md.

- *We all loved those old feuds, Marian. In fact I'm looking for someone to start a fight with right now. How about you and I measuring off and starting to swing at each other? We could use the five bucks you're winning for Band-Aids.*

Dear Editor:

I'm asking for more of the science fiction stories I don't like. They're stories about atomic war.

I'm asking for them because science fiction keeps us aware of the danger of such warfare. Too many of us (and that includes me) buy the daily papers for the comics and sports.

The news in the papers and their editorials are about Others—others who we don't know and are not likely ever to meet. But fiction—fiction is about People like us—those who will suffer most if atomic war comes.

Stories of intercontinental missiles bore me; I want to read about the antics of space girls on far planets. Plenty of us, however, do read the atomic warfare stories—and those of us who do not at least see them in the magazine and are thereby reminded of what goes on in the world.

Science fiction can serve mightily in preventing the mental torpor that invites another (and this time a super) Pearl Harbor.

Michael Mitchell
228 W. Durand St.
Philadelphia 19, Pa.

• *If atomic war comes, very few of us will be around to suffer, Michael, and those intercontinental missiles certainly are boring. Let's just hope they don't bore in some fine day and blow us all sky high.*

Dear Editor:

"The Sign of the Tiger," I believe, was one of the best novels ever to appear in *Amazing Stories*. I have read all kinds in my life and I can rather seriously say that *Amazing* is back again on the high trail if you can give us a long novel like this each and every issue.

I'd like to be one of the first to cast my ballot for more of those old kind of stories like "Princess of the Sea" and others. I surely do miss the certain brand and kind of adventure in both *Amazing* and *Fantastic* that we used to get most of the time.

I'd like to recommend right now that all of the other more seriously minded readers write in and vote for the return of this calibre of stories.

James W. Ayers
609 First Street
Attalla, Ala.

• *We're eagerly awaiting the ballots.*





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THE WATERS UNDER THE EARTH

BY

CHARLES ERIC MAINE

ILLUSTRATED BY SUMMERS

BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

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YOU WILL MEET—

Philip Wade. Young, ambitious. Forced into a role of
colossal deception.

Janet Wade. Philip's wife. Emotions warring with loyalty.

Shirley Sye. Attractive young widow. Adaptable to order
or chaos.

Susan Vance. Warm, intelligent. A vestige of humanity in
a world gone mad.

Sir Hubert Piercy. Chief of I. B. I. A fighter of losing
battles.

Colonel Brindle. Bureau man. Contemptuous public servant.

Lieutenant Patten. Quiet, sincere. An idealist lost in a
nightmare of cruel realism.

1. Operation Nutcracker

THE car had been difficult to start that morning, and by the time Philip Wade reached Fleet Street he was already a half-hour late. It was still raining—the same stubborn drizzle falling from an iron gray sky that hadn't changed color in a week. Office lights glared resentfully from the high windows. He paused briefly at the newspaper kiosk near Ludgate Circus, scanning the paraded papers and magazines for the familiar cover of *Outlook*, but it was absent.

He caught the newsvendor's eye.
"Sold out?"

"No, Mr. Wade. Withdrawn—about half an hour ago."

"Any idea why?" asked Wade, surprised.

The newsvendor shrugged.

He hurried on through the rain to the Stenniger Press building. MacLaren joined him in the elevator. He was smoking a drooping home-made cigarette and peering apathetically at nothing in particular through his concave glasses. A good man, Mac, in his day. One time sub-editor on a national newspaper, until he swapped responsibility for alcohol.

"Some trouble with *Outlook*?" Wade asked.

MacLaren eyed him curiously. "Haven't you heard? My dear boy, why should I be the one to spoil your day?" He chuckled briefly and got out of the elevator at the second floor. Mac was an odd-job sub in the Stenniger organization.

Wade went on to the fourth and kicked his way through the double swing door with the glass panels that announced: *Outlook—Editorial Offices*. The girls in the gen-

eral office watched him with veiled interest as he hurried across the room and through the reception annex to the newsroom. There was a quietness about the place that he didn't like—a kind of furtive, restless tension. Even the typewriters seemed muffled and neurotic.

He exchanged greetings with Rouse and Barlow at the news desk and entered his own office. Betty was busy on the typewriter, but she stopped as he came in.

"Good morning, Mr. Wade."

"Morning, Betty. What goes on?"

Betty regarded him with honest if adolescent anxiety. "They're withdrawing the entire edition of *Outlook*. Mr. Willis has gone over to the printing works. And Mr. Stenniger wants to see you right away."

"What's it all about?"

Betty shook her head solemnly. "I don't know, Mr. Wade."

"I'll talk to Howard at the works," he said.

She switched the inside phone through to the printer on the direct line. Howard was in the machine room going quietly mad, they said. Could he ring back?

"Never mind. I'll talk to Willis instead."

Pete Willis as chief sub-editor of *Outlook* spent a great deal of time at the printing works. He was always on hand to check and pass machine proofs as the weekly edition of the magazine went to press, and it was rumored that he could spot a six-point literal at five feet.

"Pete," said Wade, "what the hell's all the panic about?"

Pete sounded more than a little peeved. "Last minute surgery, Phil. Stenniger ordered a remake on the eight-page ~~fun~~. We have

to pull out the center pages of every copy and print a new insert. Howard is having several babies. We won't hit the newsstands until Friday."

"But why?"

"All I know, Phil, is that your five-page feature on this Nutcracker business has to come out. I'm pushing in two short articles and half a page of fillers to make up the form. We may get the machine running around three o'clock if Howard gets his finger out, but the collating and restitching will take time. If you ask me, Stenniger's round the bend. Howard's here now. D'you want to talk to him?"

"No," Wade said firmly, but Howard came on anyway. There was a plaintive tone in his voice which Wade found immensely irritating.

"Wade," said Howard, "this is lousing up the entire schedule on machine number four. We've got six other periodicals to print. And as for collating and stitching—you know that's always a bottleneck."

"I'm sorry," said Wade, "but it's your problem, not mine."

"You might tell Stenniger that this is going to cost a lot of money. We've got a machine standing idle for a start, and we'll have to run the day shift on overtime. The night shift too."

"Tell him yourself," Wade suggested sourly, hanging up.

He sat down at his desk thoughtfully, propping his chin in his hands. What was wrong with the Nutcracker story, anyway? It was a good imaginative illustrated feature based on the extensive Anglo-American series of H-bomb tests that had taken place in the early summer under the code name Operation Nutcracker. It was a crusading article underlining some

of the dangers that might conceivably result from the indiscriminate testing of more and more powerful nuclear weapons. A little sensational and lurid, perhaps, but then there *had* in fact been excessive rainfall in most continents of the world ever since the tests (even in the Sahara, according to the French Meteorological Office), and some rain *had* been slightly radioactive (this has been confirmed by D.S.I.R. at Slough who had investigated sporadic interference to u.h.f. radio propagation from radioactive clouds), and there *had* been recurrent earth tremors in the Pacific and the Far East (one of the most severe had occurred only a few hours earlier, devastating smaller towns in the Japanese islands), and there *was* evidence that there had been a measurable fall in what might be called sea level at certain points in both hemispheres, coupled with the spontaneous appearance of powerful oceanic currents hitherto unrecorded. The article had simply attempted to add these facts together to present a comprehensible if imaginative whole, and there had certainly been no breach of security. After all, the H-bomb tests were old hat—they had been fully reported in all the newspapers at the time, and in cinema and television newsreels. So why all the panic?

There was only one way to find out.

Walter Stenniger was chairman of the board of Stenniger Press, a self-made man with a soft heart and a shrewd head. Publishing, so far as he was concerned, was a balance sheet—a perpetual contest between income and costs. He thought in terms of percentages,

but he also had a keen eye for the slick headline and the hard-hitting copy. Some thirty years of his life had been spent in Fleet Street, and few doubted that the next thirty would be similarly engaged. He was a rugged man, big and bony, with pale blue eyes and a deep rasping voice that sounded as if it had been etched with nitric acid. Above all he was a man of action; he thought simply and cleanly, and his decisions were always clear cut, though his motives were often obscure.

The six periodicals comprising the Stenniger publishing group were a curious blend of the superficially incompatible. *Outlook* was the foundation stone that kept the organization going, the illustrated weekly that carried a respectable quantity of advertising and brought in the revenue to sustain its sister periodicals during their more difficult moments. The other magazines dealt with boxing, aquaria and tropical fish, factory management, amateur photography and furniture retailing, and between them they held their own, profits varying with the seasonal fluctuations of advertising. Stenniger was always on the lookout for ailing independent publications in any specialist field that could be bought out as an act of mercy, to be reincarnated in a new and livelier format; it was in this way that he had built up, and was still building up, his small but significant empire.

Wade had expected his boss to be showing symptoms of a caustic temper, but in fact the reverse was true. Stenniger was lounging back in his comfortably upholstered chair, benignly smoking a cigar.

"A bad business," said Stenniger, quite complacently. "Don't misun-

derstand me, Wade. I'm not blaming you. You know my policy. The editor is always right."

Wade didn't feel very mollified. "I'd like to know why the entire edition has been pulled back just to take out a perfectly innocent story about H-bombs."

"Home Office order. I never saw the government act so quick. Ever heard of Sir Hubert Piercey?"

"Vaguely."

"He's a kind of unofficial government department. All by himself. Job is to set up other government departments. That's exactly what he's doing."

"But what has that to do with *Outlook*?"

"I'm coming to it. Don't rush me." Stenniger struck a match to relight his cigar. "One of the new departments is concerned with press and broadcasting. A kind of central information bureau."

"Sounds more like a censorship set-up to me." Wade commented acidly.

"In a way. Sir Hubert thinks there may be a need to control the way in which news is presented. An official directive is going out. All papers and magazines will toe the line."

"I don't like the sound of it," said Wade, frowning, "and in any case I'm damned if I can see any objection to the Nutcracker feature. It was purely speculative."

Stenniger beamed and thumped the desk. "That's the word! Speculative! Sir Hubert said the article was too speculative to be in the best public interest."

Wade considered the remark for a few moments, then gave up. "What the devil does he mean by that?" he demanded.

Stenniger shrugged heavily. "I don't know. You don't know. All

the same, the article had to be killed, and we killed it. Not more than a couple of thousand copies of *Outlook* were sold to the public."

"I still don't like it. People will notice the change. It will focus attention on the Nutcracker business. The papers will comment on it."

"The papers won't," said Stenniger, smiling. "They'll be gagged. And the few people who've already bought *Outlook* won't buy another on Friday. There'll be no talk and no comment."

Wade stood up, feeling baffled and frustrated, but aware that there was nothing further to be said or done. Censorship was a new and sinister factor that didn't make sense. There was no crisis of any significance anywhere in the world, except, perhaps, in the Far East where earthquakes were causing considerable devastation and political unrest. There had to be a reason—a strong and possibly urgent reason—for totalitarian action of this kind, but obviously it was a closely guarded secret for the moment.

He remembered his conversation with Howard on the phone and said: "Howard is worried about costs—machines idling, overtime, and so on. He asked me to mention it."

Stenniger waved a hand generously. "Tell him to forget it. The government will pay all the expenses entailed."

Which explained, Wade thought, Stenniger's air of sleek satisfaction. If ever a man came out of a deal of this kind without showing a profit, his name wasn't Stenniger.

"Another thing," Stenniger went on. "Sir Hubert wants to talk to you. I plugged you hard, Wade—

told him what a good man you are. All the rest." He winked confidentially. "Wouldn't surprise me if he offered you a key job in this new government department."

Wade couldn't avoid being taken aback and showing it.

"If I were you I'd accept it," Stenniger added.

Wade tried hard to think of something intelligent to say, but his mind seemed temporarily paralyzed.

"It's not that I want to get rid of you," said Stenniger, enjoying the other's confusion. "I wouldn't want to run *Outlook* if you weren't in the editorial chair. I'll be frank with you, but keep it under your hat. Top secret." He leaned forward, spreading his fingers slowly on the desk blotter. "The fact is, Wade, I'm pulling out. I'm negotiating the sale of the entire concern, *Outlook* and the rest, to one of the big groups. My guess is there won't be any *Outlook* at all six months from now."

Stenniger sat back in his chair and ground the stub of his cigar into a cut-glass ashtray. "I'm going to Canada, Wade. Always had a hankering. It's a country with a big future—and plenty of snow and ice."

It wasn't until many months later that Wade understood the true significance of Stenniger's last remark.

Although Wade spent a further ten minutes in Stenniger's office, he learned nothing new; on the other hand, he was able to resolve much of his bewilderment. On the surface the facts were disconnected: government censorship of *Outlook* magazine, the setting up of some kind of official press and broadcasting information bureau,

Sir Hubert Piercey's apparent interest in Wade himself, and, most astonishing thing of all, Stenniger's arbitrary abandonment of what was, in effect, his life's work for an unpredictable future in Canada. There seemed to be no point of contact anywhere, no logical sequence of cause and effect. Like one of the Pacific earthquakes the entire situation had exploded abruptly, disrupting the established pattern of life.

There obviously had to be an explanation—one simple basic explanation linking the isolated fragments of the picture together, and Stenniger knew about it—Wade was sure of that. Stenniger had contacts and friends in high political and governmental circles.

Whatever had instigated the unprecedented act of censorship had also prompted Stenniger to dispose of his publishing business and clear out to Canada.

Wade found himself doubting the reality of what had happened. Back in his own office the interview with Stenniger was already taking on a dreamlike quality. "Sir Hubert will get in touch with you when he is ready," had been Stenniger's final words, and even they, echoing and reechoing in his mind, had taken on a hollow synthetic timbre.

He sorted through the mass of proofs on his desk until he found the five pages of the offending article. The headline, bold and interrogative, asked: *Is the Tide*



Volcanic blasts ripped the earth.

Going Out Forever? Alongside, spread across three columns, was a large picture of an H-bomb explosion; even on the coarse proof paper the outline of the immense incandescent mushroom possessed a certain latent terror.

He read the article slowly and carefully, assessing the meaning and full significance of each sentence, and when he reached the end he had found no fault with it. Suddenly the need to talk to somebody became imperative. He thumbed switch number four on the desk intercom unit.

"Sye," announced a husky feminine voice.

"Philip here," said Wade. "You busy, Shirley?"

"Yes—unless you want to twist my arm."

He glanced quickly at his wrist watch. It was eleven thirty-five and they'd been open five minutes.

"I'll twist your arm," he agreed.

He picked her up and took her across Fleet Street to the Globe tavern. The proofs of the Nutcracker article were in his pocket.

Shirley Sye was an ex-model and looked it. She walked with poise and her statistics were still sufficiently vital to attract a second glance from the casual male. Her hair was black and sleek, and her eyes hazel. Her complexion in longshot was mellow suntan, but in close-up sallow. She'd been thirty-five for the past seven years.

Shirley was editor of the woman's section of *Outlook*, a job for which she was adequately qualified, physically and mentally. Mainly she supervised the beauty column, the cookery corner, the fashion page, and the other miscellaneous features slanted at the female reader. Her mind, Wade found, was alert and responsive, but

sometimes he suspected that his liking for her went a little deeper. She, in return, didn't exactly hate the sight of him.

They sat together at a small round table in a corner of the saloon bar. Wade was drinking Scotch, and Shirley was on gin and Dubonnet. He had spread the proofs out over the table top, and was explaining the gist of the article to her.

"Operation Nutcracker took place on June the seventh. Three hydrogen bombs were exploded in the Kaluiki group of islands in the South Pacific. The first was at an altitude of about five thousand feet. The second—sea level. And the third was the daddy of them all. . . ."

"I know," Shirley murmured, scanning the printed lines on the rough proof paper.

The third and biggest—she read—was a new and hitherto untested monster weapon of joint Anglo-American design. It was exploded beneath the ocean at a depth of two miles. The fireball, obscured by an immense curtain of steam, rose incredibly from the boiling ocean like some monstrous incandescent phoenix. The pressure wave rocked seismographs throughout the entire world. . . .

"It was the biggest man-made explosion of all time," Wade said. "The apex of the mushroom reached fifty thousand feet—perhaps more. Radioactive fallout is still taking place here and there—after six months."

Shirley sipped her gin and looked pensive. "One of these days they'll let loose a really big banger that'll split the world in half," she remarked.

"Maybe they've already done it. Ever since Operation Nutcracker

there have been incessant earth tremors—sometimes violent earthquakes—in the Pacific area. Tidal waves, too. D'you realize more than thirty-five thousand people have lost their lives?"

"Mmm. No wonder the Japs are worried."

"The Australians, too. And the West Coast Americans. Buildings were damaged in Los Angeles only last week."

Wade said: "Within four hours of the explosion a number of small islands to the southwest of the proving zone disappeared completely. But in the northeast some new islands were born. You can almost draw in a dividing line between the two."

"What was the official explanation?"

"There wasn't one. Just some pseudo-scientific jargon about subsidence and contour reaction. You know what I think?"

Shirley smiled. She invariably knew what Wade thought, but she realized that the question was merely rhetorical.

Wade's fingernail scratched a line between the islands on the map. "Here—between the islands that died and those that were born—the bed of the ocean was fractured by the third H-bomb. Part of the bed moved downwards. The other part moved up."

Shirley nodded. "That would account for the business of the islands coming and going."

"And the immense tidal wave recorded just after the explosion—it was simply displaced water."

"All this is very interesting, Philip," Shirley remarked, "but it doesn't add up to a breach of security. Besides, you're talking a lot and I can't listen when I'm thirsty."

Wade took her empty glass and his own and had them refilled at the bar, ordering doubles in anticipation of Shirley's thirst. His own, too, for that matter, though drink had little effect on him—at the worst he subsided into a sour, caustic mood of aggressive cynicism without ever losing coherence of speech.

He returned to the table to find Shirley reading the proofs. He sat down, saying nothing, allowing her to continue until, presently, she put down the pages with a sigh and reached instinctively towards her glass.

"I see your point, Phil," she said, "but isn't it just a little far fetched? All this business of the earthquakes extending along the line of the fracture, lengthening and widening it. . . ."

"It could be," Wade pointed out solemnly.

"All right, maybe it could. But where you overstep the bounds of possibility is in saying that the Pacific Ocean is pouring into the crack."

"Why?"

She hesitated, glass in hand, forcing herself to think more deeply than was her custom. "Well, we all know that the earth isn't hollow."

"I didn't say it was."

"Cavities, then. . . ."

"Shirley, we know that the center of this planet is hot—maybe white hot. But it's cooling all the time. And anything that cools must contract. So, the core of the earth is shrinking continually, breaking away from the cold outer crust on which we live. There must be cavities deep under the ground—beneath the oceans."

"Perhaps you're right, Phil," Shirley conceded. "But to go fur-

ther and suggest that the Pacific Ocean is draining away through a crack in the ocean bed. . . ."

"Not only the Pacific, but the Atlantic too. All the oceans and seas that are interconnected."

She smiled, a little patronizingly, Wade thought. "Phil, there's a hell of a lot of water in all the oceans of the world."

"Sure there is, Shirley. But, you know something, the Pacific Ocean at its deepest point is less than point one per cent of the diameter of the earth. Given a few man-sized cavities beneath the earth's crust you could pour every drop of water that exists into them—and there'd still be room for more."

Shirley finished her drink as if she needed it. They ordered another round.

"How's Janet and young David?" she asked.

"Fine," said Wade, "but don't change the subject."

"I thought we'd finished with it. No reason for censorship that I can see."

"Nor me," Wade admitted.

"Unless," she added thoughtfully, "someone in government circles took it seriously." She paused, staring soberly at Wade. "Supposing what you wrote in that article happened to be true, Phil? Supposing the oceans *did* disappear in that way—through a fracture in the bed of the Pacific?"

Wade shrugged. "It would be damned inconvenient for ships."

"You're being facetious," said Shirley accusingly. "But even so, if there were no shipping, mightn't it introduce economic difficulties? No imports—no exports. No grain ships, no oil tankers. . . ."

"That's certainly an angle." Wade paused for a few seconds to roll the idea round his mind, but

when he had finished it was still the same idea. "I can't imagine any responsible politician getting excited about it, though, and I can't see why this article"—he placed one hand heavily on the proofs—"should be arbitrarily suppressed because of some remote possibility that ships might become obsolete at some unspecified future date."

"How about a general shortage of water?" Shirley suggested brightly. "Mightn't that create an emergency?" She picked up her glass and eyed it affectionately. "Not that I ever drink the stuff," she added.

Wade shook his head. "We don't drink sea water, anyway—don't even use it, except for swimming in occasionally. All our fresh water comes from inland lakes and rivers—ultimately from rainfall. They wouldn't be affected."

Shirley finished her drink. "In that case the thing is still as big a mystery as ever, and we've been wasting time talking about it."

Wade glanced at his wrist watch. "I'll buy you a lunch," he offered, and Shirley accepted. They went upstairs to the restaurant.

Shirley said from across the table: "This business of water level—is it still falling?"

Wade nodded.

"How much?" she asked.

"Oh, very little. A foot, two feet—not much more."

Shirley laughed. "Then what the hell are we worrying about, Phil? Sling me the menu."

2. Panic In London

ONE of the frustrating things of life is waiting for a promised event that does not materialize. In

the weeks following the publication of the censored edition of *Outlook* Wade found himself caught up in the same old routine of writing, editing and publishing—a routine which formerly he had accepted with a certain unexpressed pride as the frictionless working of an efficient machine, but which now irritated and unsettled him simply because it was the formula as before. Winter came—a mild, wet winter—and still the rainfall was more than average, and still radioactive fallout was detected in the most improbable zones of the world.

Wade had kept Stenniger's secret with a certain reluctant determination. So far as everyone in the organization was concerned it was hot news that would have given rise to speculative gossip for months to come. But Wade said nothing—except to his wife.

Janet was neither impressed nor worried. Indeed, where Stenniger was concerned she invariably adopted an attitude of slightly hostile scepticism. Wade held himself to blame for the discernible bitterness of her response to people and events; there had been an occasion some years ago when he had allowed himself to be swept into an intense if transient affair with another woman. It was past history now, and if Janet had never found out, well—life would have gone on unchanged. She had been rational about the thing, that he admitted. Too rational, perhaps. She had condoned the fact of adultery, but in doing so had twisted their marriage into a shape that he thought was sometimes unmanagable. She had condoned, but not forgiven. And the marriage had survived by sheer dogged effort on both sides in the interests of David,

who was eight, and as bright a boy as you would expect to see any place any time.

Janet, despite her ignorance on matters of nuclear fission, produced clear-cut solutions to the problems that had been worrying her husband. The falling water level was simplicity itself, she stated. Hadn't there been a tremendous increase in rainfall throughout the world during the past few months? That's where the water had gone—up into the clouds and down to earth again in the form of rain. And as for censorship, in her opinion the government was perfectly justified. After all, earthquakes were still taking place in the Far East, and thousands of people were losing their lives. There were political issues involved. If it were admitted that the H-bomb tests were directly responsible for the subsequent earthquakes, who could say what complex and even dangerous international situation might not result, with Soviet Russia backing Far East demands for compensation and perhaps forcing a resolution against Britain and the U.S.A. through the United Nations?

Wade had to admit that she could be right.

"And as for Stenniger," Janet went on, "it doesn't surprise me that he's going to sell out. That's his business—buying and selling. Why do you suppose he built up his publishing organization on salvaged magazines that had practically folded? He got them for a song and made them pay so that he could sell out at the right price at the right time."

Wade sighed and held on to his patience. "You're not being fair to Stenniger, Janet," he protested. "He's a shrewd character, I admit,

but he's genuine in his own way."

Janet laughed sardonically. "I'll bet he doesn't go within a thousand miles of Canada, Bermuda or Florida, more likely—or even the Riviera."

"That's not true. If he said Canada then that's what he meant. In any case, what does it matter where he goes?"

"It matters a great deal to me," she said decisively. "Seems to me that when the new management takes over you stand a good chance of getting an increase in salary—if you haven't got whiskey on your breath when you ask."

Wade ignored the stab. "I may not be around," he said flatly. "According to Stenniger the *Outlook* magazine is finished. Firms often buy out competitive magazines in order to suppress them."

"That's exactly the kind of deal I could imagine Stenniger making."

"At least he's playing it square. This government job may be a bigger thing than editing *Outlook*."

"What government job?" she asked with irony. "You're naive, Philip. Stenniger was just oiling you."

Wade sighed again. He no longer felt inclined to pursue the conversation, if such it could be called.

"He needn't have said a word about the government job," he pointed out.

Janet's smile was razor sharp. "It came naturally. He had to mention Sir Hubert Piercy because of the censorship. That opened the way for a little soft soap." A pause while she eyed him critically. "He's got you taped, Philip. He knows how to sell you any time."

Wade moved towards the door. "Have it your own way. For the moment nothing has changed."

"Nothing has changed," she echoed. There was eternity in her voice.

He went out.

Wade was sitting on a stool at a local bar sipping whiskey and tracing abstract patterns on the counter with the aid of a puddle of splashed beer. The saloon was quiet and almost empty.

"The breakouts," said Wade quietly, vindictively. The breakouts were the trouble. The occasions when the sutures of the old wound broke open, when the malignant disease of an unforgiven infidelity tortured and strained the union of two people. It would pass—it always did. Tomorrow things would be placid once more, and they might even discuss Stenniger in an intelligent, dispassionate manner. Meanwhile. . . .

He emptied his glass and had it refilled.

Philip Wade—editor of *Outlook*. So what? How did *Outlook* rate in the scheme of things? Not much. Everyone knew that the Stenniger outfit was run on a shoestring, but Stenniger was a good picker when it came to staff. His key men and women were competent and unambitious types, some of them rejects from the nationals, others good conscientious individuals who thought they'd been given a break and were content to stick in a groove for evermore. And the alcoholics, of course—there were at least four in the Stenniger organization. Funny thing about alcoholics—they could be brilliant people, imaginative and indefatigable workers—when they were sober.

And as for *Outlook*—it was strictly small-time. Coming on nicely, but still having circulation troubles. Publicized circulation one

hundred and fifty thousand—that was the figure on the rate card. Print run seventy-five thousand. It was a good thing the space buyers at the advertising agencies didn't check with the printer.

Funny how your standards change in twelve years, Wade thought. As a reporter on a local paper in North London he'd been full of the integrity of true journalism, obsessed with the ideal of objective reporting. But somehow the writers with the gimmicks, who found the unusual angles or sometimes manufactured them, always seemed to get the by-lines and the promotion.

What am I cribbing about, anyway? he asked himself. I used the same technique. That was how I broke into the pages of *Outlook* as a free-lance, and that was how I came to have a job on the staff a year later, and that was how I came to meet Janet when she was Stenniger's secretary. Fate weaves that kind of pattern. And in the course of time I came to be editor when old Waterhouse retired. He was a has-been, too—a Stenniger special choice, with ex-national newspaper experience, and enough ability to get *Outlook* on its feet after the take-over—until sheer senile decay forced him to retire. A great job I did—I put nearly twenty-thousand on to the circulation figure and in all that time my salary went up by five per cent and somehow I never got round to taking a straight line with Stenniger.

Wade ordered another drink. There was time for one more—time for two if he made it snappy. But somehow he didn't seem to care. Nothing mattered. Stenniger was a crook, and the government job was a sop, *Outlook* was sen-

tenced to death, Janet was cold and remote behind some invisible and impenetrable barrier, and life was a still, stagnant tide ebbing from nowhere to eternity. *Is the Tide Going Out Forever?* he asked himself sardonically, recalling the banned article that had, it seemed, triggered off his current problem.

"Who cares?" he said aloud, then finished his drink and left the bar.

You're not trying hard enough, chum, he told himself. You're running away from life instead of facing up to it. You're not being fair to Janet. After all, she stuck by you at a time when you didn't deserve it—and what have you ever done in return? What have you ever done that wasn't done through a haze of alcohol? Or, come to the point, what have you ever done?

As from now, he vowed, things will be different. I'll beat this bogey once and for all. Janet and me will be pals again, like we used to. And I'll put *Outlook* on the map in a big way so that no new management will have the courage to suppress it. There's still time—still plenty of time.

And there was plenty of time. At least three weeks. . . .

The noble resolutions of the night evaporated under the critical influence of daylight and sobriety. They always did. Wade resumed his normal and imperturbable way of life. Stenniger wasn't so bad, and *Outlook* was a good little paper, full of vigor, and as for the drink—it was nothing more than liquid aspirin to help make the wheels go round, and so long as the wheels kept going round nothing else mattered.

Wade, in fact, looked like a man



PHILIP WADE

who had no difficulty in keeping wheels revolving. There was something in the shape of him, hard, lean, perhaps a little bony, that suggested controlled power. His face was rugged without being handsome. For a man of forty-minus he had plenty of hair, thick dark hair that sometimes became lank and drooped solemnly over one eye. His movements and mannerisms were relaxed and generally unhurried, and his voice was crisp with implied authority. It was only in his eyes, blue and restless, and perhaps in his habit of stroking his chin pensively, that one could detect a subtle uneasiness, a suggestion that the latent power was static rather than dynamic. It was the power of stubbornness rather than aggression. He applied that stubbornness to the daily routine of work, and the wheels went round, and he was satisfied.

Below the level of day-to-day journalism things were happening, however. There was talk in Fleet Street, rumors that spread from mouth to mouth like a contagious virus, shadows of news stories that could no longer be published because of the embargo. The terms of the directive from the Whitehall office of Sir Hubert Piercy had been precise: all news stories and features pertaining in any way to Operation Nutcracker, or to the Pacific earthquakes, or to sea level statistics, or to government activities in the Arctic, had to receive official scrutiny and approval before publication. Approval was invariably withheld. The significant and worrying thing, so far as Wade was concerned, was that exactly the same kind of press censorship was taking place in Europe and in America—in every country in the world, so far as he knew.

The reference to government activities in the Arctic puzzled him, and, curiously enough, the rumors were mainly centered on that very area. Stacey of the Interpress agency, for instance, knew for certain that a mammoth development scheme was in progress in the extreme north of Canada, in Grant Land and beyond, and north of Greenland. The Russians, too, it seemed were up to something north of the northernmost fringe of Siberia. And in the southern hemisphere mysterious activities were rumored in Antarctica. Stacey couldn't say what kind of activities, but according to his source of information, which he wouldn't reveal, immense quantities of materials and engineering plant were being shipped and flown north and south, almost to the poles. Atomic reactors, too, he said.

Other rumors hinted at huge camps of centrally heated prefabricated huts that were being erected at speed on the polar ice caps, and still others implied that vast dumps of food were being established in what was, in effect, earth's natural refrigerator. Wade couldn't make sense of any of this idle talk. In the ordinary way he would probably have dismissed it all as a fantastic over-exaggeration of some perfectly modest Arctic enterprise, perhaps a scientific expedition. What did disturb him, however, was the unmistakable reference to government activity in the Arctic contained in the press directive from Sir Hubert's office. If the newspapers were debarred from mentioning it, then there was probably considerable substance in the rumors.

Although the news agencies no longer sent in teletypes about fresh earthquakes in the Pacific, it was

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common knowledge that they were still happening. Cargo boats and tramp steamers returning from the Far East brought lurid stories of new disasters, of rioting in the Japanese islands, and parts of China and Malaya, of martial law and indiscriminate executions.

The water level stories were increasing, too. It was rumored that in some parts of the world the level of the sea had apparently dropped by anything from four to six feet, and this, it seemed, was causing difficulty to shipping. Many harbors were becoming unapproachable as the water receded. In effect the coastlines of continents all over the world were being extended as sea level dropped.

The same thing was happening in Britain, too, although Wade had not yet seen it for himself. It was as if the tide were going out — far, far out — leaving a permanent border of sand and stones and sea bed fringing the coast of the island. In the Mersey and the Clyde and the Thames Estuary, and nearly every other important waterway, dredgers were hard at work night and day in a frantic endeavor to keep the shipping lanes open. Stacey, who seemed to know everything worth knowing, affirmed that the military had been called in to help, and that in some of the bigger estuaries they were using high explosives to clear the silt from the river mouths.

Very little of this rumor and guesswork reached the newspapers, nor was there any official confirmation by radio or television. There was some oblique reference in one or two of the national dailies to a phase of extremely low tides due, it was suggested, to an unfavorable juxtaposition of lunar and solar gravitational drag on the

waters of the world. Wade recognized this as pseudoscientific gobbledegook — probably government sponsored. No doubt a great deal of earnest discussion was taking place in Parliament and at Cabinet level, but not a word reached the printed page.

It was all very mysterious and unsettling, and yet life went on from day to day in the same old way. If you ignored the rumors there was no reason to suppose that it would ever be otherwise.

Until the night of the earthquake.

It was a Tuesday night in the second week of January — another of the mild, wet nights that had characterized this freak winter. The time? Wade wasn't sure. Somewhere around three a.m. It came to him gradually, in a deep dreamless sleep, that the windows were rattling violently, as if in a gale. Even so he did not fully awaken. The noise was a meaningless phenomenon, unrelated to reality, without significance in the shifting, fugitive dream world in which his mind was meandering.

Then Janet screamed close to his ear. He was alert in an instant and for a brief interval the only sound he could hear was the pounding of his own blood in his head. The windows rattled again, and beyond the windows was a deep-throated rumbling sound, like distant thunder, persistent and menacing. A door slammed remotely. Footsteps were hurrying along the road outside, and he could detect the staccato murmur of excited voices far away.

"Philip!" Janet cried, gripping his arm fiercely. He sat up, struggling to regain mental orientation, and reached for the pendant light switch over the bed.

The room shook. The house shook. Glass shattered and fell from the window into the room. The ceiling caved in with a tremendous tearing crash. Plaster showered down upon the bed in large jagged fragments. Janet screamed again, and from the adjacent bedroom where David slept came the alarmed cry of a small terrified boy.

Wade found the switch and pressed it, but nothing happened. He rolled out of bed, walking over the shards of plaster that littered the carpet and fumbled his way in the darkness to David's room. He held on to the boy, talking to him soothingly and reassuringly as the house continued to shudder, and presently Janet joined him. They stood together, a compact group in the blackness, surrounded by noise, and feeling without understanding the wild thrusting of the floor on which they stood. The excited voices were louder now, and occasionally distant screams punctuated the background noise like sharp erratic needles.

It came to Wade gradually that this was an earthquake. The realization produced no immediate reaction; it was an impersonal fact, something objective, beyond emotion and feeling. This was what had been happening in the Far East for months past. The ground—the solid, secure ground on which London was built—had broken adrift, was trembling with some supernalague. The house, so big and hard and rectangular, was rocking and crumbling. It might collapse about them at any moment like a pack of cards. In street after street houses were shaking and people were awake and afraid, perhaps holding on to each other as he and Janet and David were

doing, or rushing headlong into the roads in search of safety.

The small bedroom was suddenly illuminated with orange light. Seconds later the dull concussion of an explosion pulsed through the room. Wade crossed to the window and pulled back the curtain. Beyond the rooftops opposite the black sky was stained red—an angry luminescent red.

"Phil," came Janet's voice starkly through the mottled gloom. "Phil—come away from the window."

He moved back, and as he did so the house heaved gigantically for the last time. The window broke with an astringent sound, and glass fell inwards. And then it was over, and the house became still and quiet, and there was only the noise from the streets, the sounds of frightened people and the drone of speeding cars and the swooping jangle of bells as ambulances and fire engines raced into action.

David was trembling and silent. Wade patted his head, and put one arm round Janet's shoulders. Her flesh was cold under the thin night-dress.

"It's finished," Wade said quietly.

"Phil—I'm scared. . . ."

He squeezed her shoulders reassuringly. "Nothing to worry about, darling. Just a slight earth tremor—that's all."

It was a humane lie, he thought. The earthquake had been severe and had probably done incalculable damage. His brain was too numbed and fatigued to attempt to add it up. Something was wrong somewhere. This kind of thing just didn't happen in England. Somewhere behind it in the inexorable chain of cause and effect were the

events of the past few months. The Pacific earthquakes, the receding waters, going back to a single point of origin—Operation Nutcracker. The understatement of all time, he thought ironically. Operation Earthbreaker would have been more accurate.

"It's all over," he added quietly and calmly, but he knew he was wrong. It was all about to begin.

3. The Crumbling Earth

THE morning papers carried no reference to the earthquake, not because of censorship, Wade realized, but because they had already been printed before the catastrophe happened. Driving into town he saw relatively little sign of devastation, but here and there broken windows, shattered chimney stacks and the occasional wrecked building underlined the events of the night. London looked more like the victim of an air raid than an earthquake.

The explosion and subsequent fire, he learned, had been the result of damage to a local gasometer. Water mains had been fractured in a host of districts, and in some places streets had been transformed into shallow canals through which his car splashed noisily. Electricity and telephone services had been disrupted on a wide scale, but engineers were rapidly getting things back to normal.

The office buzzed with excited chatter, as did Fleet Street itself. The early editions of the London evening papers were already on the streets, carrying banner headlines and half-page pictures of the destruction.

In later editions the headlines

were smaller and the pictures were across two columns, and by evening the earthquake story had been relegated to the inside pages.

Wade had lunch with Shirley Sye again—it was getting to be a habit.

"Didn't know a thing," Shirley said. "I slept like a log right through it."

"Funny thing," said Wade. "There was no feeling of fear. Just a kind of blank tenseness—like in the war during the air raids. You waited and waited—desensitized."

"The general adaptation syndrome," Shirley remarked casually. She caught Wade's eye and smiled. "Sorry. I was regressing."

"That makes sense, too."

"What I meant was—human beings, all living creatures, tend to withdraw into themselves at moments of potential danger. Even the amoeba reverts to a spherical shape to present the minimum of surface area to the enemy."

"We weren't talking about the amoeba."

"Hell, let's change the subject," Shirley said. "Once upon a time I was interested in psychology. Now and then I like to show off. I'm a little crazy. It comes of being a widow."

Wade let it ride for a while. Presently, half a chop later, he said: "You were trying to say something, just the same—weren't you, Shirley?"

She shrugged. "Nothing important. Just this business of the syndrome. In a crisis people behave differently—they revert to some fundamental level. It has to do with survival. Tell me, Phil—during the earthquake did you stop thinking?"

He considered briefly. "Maybe I did. So what?"

"So nothing. But that's the way

it goes. Given a long-term emergency, people stop thinking for a long time. They act instinctively, emotionally. The intellect tends to become paralyzed. Their behavior is dominated by a survival drive."

Wade finished his meal, making no further comment. Shirley seemed to be trying to prove something that was of importance to no one but herself. But that's the way she was, unpredictable, with quaint byways to her mind that he would never have suspected. General adaptation syndrome, indeed—what on earth had that to do with the earthquake? With anything at all, for that matter?

Over coffee Shirley said: "I've got a feeling Stenniger is up to something."

Wade made no comment. Stenniger's activities were top secret by decree—Stenniger's decree.

"MacLaren saw him getting into a taxi with Holtz of Consolidated Press," Shirley went on. "And Julie on the switchboard told Rouse that Stenniger had made several long calls to Consolidated. You know what I think?"

"I'll buy it."

"He's planning to sell out."

Wade frowned at her, but said nothing.

"It's logical, Phil. Stenniger build up his organization from nothing. By now it must be worth a small fortune. He's bound to sell out sooner or later."

"Okay," Wade said uneasily. "Supposing he does sell out to Consolidated—all the better for us."

"Maybe—if they retain the staff and don't fold the papers."

"Why should they do that?"

"Competition. The old cartel business. *Outlook* in particular. The other rags don't matter."

"They wouldn't fold *Outlook*," Wade said, conscious of the lie. He felt impelled to elaborate on his statement. "As a matter of fact, Stenniger has already hinted to me that some kind of deal was in the air. But you and I don't have to worry, Shirley. It's a package deal, as far as I know."

"So far as you know," she echoed. "All the same, I think you ought to keep an eye on him, just in case."

"Which eye?" Wade asked. It made Shirley smile and it was a suitable full point to an awkward conversation. Wade paid the bill and they went back to the office.

Wade couldn't have kept an eye on Stenniger even if he had wanted to, for Stenniger did not put in an appearance at the office for three days. In the meantime the earthquake became a curiously unreal memory once the essential services of water, electricity, gas and telephone communication had been restored. The papers had nothing to say on the subject, apart from a minimum of factual reporting in obscure columns.

When Stenniger eventually came back, the first thing he did was to send for Wade. There were two men in Stenniger's office when Wade walked in—Stenniger himself, of course, looking smug and buoyant with a large cigar dangling unlit from his lips, and a small moon-faced man with pale blue eyes and a charming manner.

Stenniger performed the introduction blandly. "Philip Wade, editor of *Outlook*. Mr. Holtz of Consolidated Press."

Wade shook hands and said how do you do, and Mr. Holtz, murmured, something unintelligible and smiled broadly, about half an

inch or so. Stenniger waved a hand towards a chair and Wade sat down.

"As from tomorrow morning at nine o'clock Consolidated Press are taking over the entire organization," Stenniger stated. "Lock, stock and barrel. Papers and personnel."

Wade said nothing. It had been a long time coming, and now here it was—the sell-out, and maybe the pay-off. He eyed his new employer. Holtz was a neat, precise man, correctly dressed in a dark suit with hand-stitched lapels and the corner of an immaculate white handkerchief peeping from his breast pocket. He was a man with an invisible smile concealed behind his lips, but the lips were dead straight and hardly moved, even when he talked.

Stenniger went on: "Mr. Holtz wants to meet the executives and key people in the organization. Starting with you, Wade."

"Naturally," said Holtz silkily, "as editor of *Outlook* you are, in our view, the most important editorial executive. All I wish to say is that there will be no immediate change in policy. I have studied the magazine for some considerable time and am perfectly satisfied." He paused for an instant, rubbing his slender fingers on his lapel as if feeling the quality of the material, then repeated: "Perfectly satisfied."

"Well, thank you, Mr. Holtz," Wade said with a hint of deference.

"That is not to say there won't be changes," Holtz put in quickly. "Small economies in production. Confining two-color printing to art paper, for instance. And a slight reorientation of editorial slant from a political viewpoint to tie in

more closely with Consolidated's own internal policy."

"I see," Wade remarked.

"One more thing, Mr. Wade. The new management require all key personnel to be signed up on a service contract—one year, initially, with the option of renewal for a three-year period, provided"—his lips made the shape of a small smile—"both parties are in agreement."

Wade thought of Sir Hubert Piercy and sucked at his lips thoughtfully. "Well . . ." he began uncertainly.

Stenniger leaned forward and said: "It's all in your favor, Wade. Something I should have done years ago. Never got round to it somehow. Security for the staff in black and white."

"It is a condition of the overall transaction," Holtz said briskly.

"But it ties me down for a year," Wade protested. "Supposing something came up?" He looked straight at Stenniger. "Supposing I wanted to go to Canada, for instance?"

Stenniger made a quiet grunting sound and stared at the ceiling.

"Is that likely?" Holtz inquired pleasantly.

"Most unlikely," said Wade. What the hell? he thought. Am I trying to prove something? If so I'm doing it the hard way. I'm confused, that's all. Stenniger tells one story about how *Outlook* will fold within six months, and Holtz tells another about how he wants to sign up the staff for a year or more. Where does Sir Hubert Piercy fit into the picture now in the labor stakes—if ever he did outside Stenniger's facile imagination?

"All right, Mr. Holtz," he said reluctantly, "I'll sign. If it's a condition of the transaction I suppose

I'll have to—we'll all have to."

To his surprise Stenniger looked at him and winked solemnly. That didn't add up, either.

"There's one thing, though," Wade added, "and that's the question of salary . . ."

Holtz cut him short with a quickly raised hand, as if he were controlling traffic. "All in good time, Mr. Wade. Let us do one thing at a time. I can promise you that all salaries will be reviewed when we have had time to analyze the economics of the organization as it now exists. At the end of the financial year, perhaps."

Wade did a rapid mental calculation. Stenniger's financial years always ended in July. Add on three months for an audit and that made October. It was a long time to wait.

He said: "I think I'd prefer to have the salary review embodied in the service contract. . . ."

Stenniger did a surprising thing. He stood up with an unlikely burst of energy, said excuse me to Holtz, crossed the room, took Wade's arm, and ushered him out of the office into the corridor. Still holding the other man's arm he turned to face him squarely, and Wade sensed a bleakness in his manner which he had never witnessed before.

"Look here, Wade," Stenniger said quietly and urgently, "what the hell are you trying to do? This deal is virtually signed and sealed. All you have to do is say yes to Holtz and keep on saying it. The others will play ball—damn it, they need the money. Why should you be so blasted independent?"

"But, Mr. Stenniger . . ."

"Shut up. I'll do the talking. You don't have to sign any service contract. Just stall him, that's all. After tomorrow it won't matter any-

way. You'll be Consolidated Property and you can do what the hell you like. Play the game the way he wants it."

Wade shook off Stenniger's grasping arm impatiently. "Everyone seems to be playing the game the way they want it except me. I'm tired of being pushed around. This is one chance I have to..."

"To what?" Stenniger demanded angrily. "To squeeze a ten per cent increase out of Holtz? You'd squeeze more gin out of a dehydrated grapefruit. I'm doing right by you, Wade, but you're so damn stubborn you can't see it. Listen. *Outlook* won't last more than a few months."

"Why not?"

"Because there won't be any bloody paper left in the country to print on." Stenniger paused, breathing heavily, still irate. "I shouldn't have said that, but you'll find it's true. I've tried to help you, Wade. Sir Hubert Piercy has a job lined up for you. You'll still be alive when the rest are dying like flies. Now go in there and make that little man happy."

Wade felt as if he had been shot down in flames. It was the Stenniger attack, as it had always been: the aggressive approach, the crisp words, the hint of secret knowledge, and above all the adroit exploitation of the old pals act. He allowed himself to be pushed back into the office.

Stenniger smiled affably at Holtz, who widened his lips fractionally in cold response.

"Sorry about the recess," Stenniger said jovially. "Wade and I understand each other pretty well. Isn't that so, Wade?"

"I guess I was a little premature, Mr. Holtz," Wade said politely. "Naturally I'll sign a serv-

ice contract with Consolidated Press. But I'd appreciate it if you'd keep the question of a salary review in mind."

"In a big organization like Consolidated, that question is always in mind," Holtz pronounced.

Throughout the rest of the day Holtz remained in Stenniger's office, interviewing the editors and advertisement managers of the various magazines. Shirley Sye went through the screening process, too, and later that evening, in the Kennedy Club near the Strand, she compared notes with Wade over a glass or two of seventy proof.

"I take it all back, Phil," she said. "Stenniger and Holtz are on the level. I like this service contract biz."

Wade murmured something non-committal.

"What I mean is," she went on, "there's no question of folding *Outlook*, or any of the other zines. And there's no question of bringing in Consolidated staff to take over."

"Sure," Wade remarked. "Our jobs are safe enough—for a year at least."

"Longer than that. You and I, Phil—they can't do without us."

"I guess not."

"After all, when you run a paper like ours on a shoestring, the staff become indispensable—key staff like you and me."

"You may be right," Wade conceded without enthusiasm.

Shirley reached across the table and touched his hand. "What's biting you, Phil? Somebody watered your whiskey?"

He smiled and took her hand, stroking her slender fingers gently with his thumb. "I've got things on

my mind, Shirley. Things I can't even talk about."

"You make it sound very ominous."

"I don't know. Maybe it is. Or maybe I'm just being taken for a ride."

She smiled and withdrew her hand. "I'd like to take you for a ride, Phil. In a taxi."

"I ought to say that, not you," he pointed out.

"But you never would. I often wonder how you ever came to get married. I'll bet your wife proposed to you."

Wade considered and pretended to think deeply. It was a rhetorical gesture. "I forget," he said. "It was about a hundred years ago."

"I might have had a chance, even then. I wish I'd got to you first. We'd have made a good team."

Wade regarded her steadily. "Shirley, you've been drinking too much. You're getting sentimental."

"You're wrong, Phil. I'm getting amorous."

"Not with me you're not."

He picked up the glasses and strolled over to the bar for refills. When he got back to the table Shirley was retouching her makeup with the aid of a small gilt compact. She looked nice, he thought, in the mellow light of the club. A little more than a chicken and a little less than a hen. Pity about Shirley. Widowhood wasn't for her—she had too much to give of herself, and her personality needed to expand. She was the extrovert forced into introversion by the inconsiderate death of a partner. How had he died, anyway, that Mr. Sye, so many years ago? Wade whirled his mind. Motor crash, pneumonia, senile decay . . . ? Hardly. Then he remem-

bered. Well, cancer was on the cards for anyone. He felt sorry for Mrs. Sye, not Mr., but that's how it was with life.

He sat down facing her and looked at her with a little deeper understanding.

Shirley said: "I've been tapping the grapevine again."

"Where do you keep it?" he asked. "Everyone taps it except me."

"Stenniger is leaving for Canada next week. Taking his whole family."

"Mmm. That's quick."

"There's a good-bye party the day after tomorrow."

"Meaning . . . ?"

"Stenniger's hired the room over the Globe. His secretary did all the arranging on the phone. He's giving a cocktail party for the entire staff."

"First I've heard of it."

Shirley smiled. "You ought to keep your ear to the ground more than you do, Phil. Didn't Howard tell you he was printing invitation cards?"

"Howard never tells me anything. What's the point of cards, anyway? Why can't Stenniger stick something on the notice board?"

"Don't underestimate the man. He likes to do things in style."

Shirley proved to be right. Wade found a gilt edged card on his desk the following morning, printed in a flowing italic script. It was a formal invitation to attend a "Press Reception" (that was Stenniger's little joke) at the Globe tavern the following evening. In the bottom left-hand corner was the tiny word *Cocktails*.

It looked as if it was going to be a good party. Within the first half hour gaiety took possession of

the assembly, and the large panelled room vibrated with talk and laughter. Stenniger had laid it on very well. There were two bars, one at either end of the room, stacked with a comprehensive variety of bottles and glasses. Everything was on the house, and Stenniger himself circulated round the room with a proprietary air, not drinking, but smoking a cigar and exchanging jovial backchat with whoever he chanced to encounter, whether executive or office junior. Mrs. Stenniger was there, too, with her oversweet smile and pale, tired face, striving to be the perfect hostess, but lacking the energy and vitality.

There were some thirty people in the room, more than it had been designed to hold with comfort. The atmosphere became overwarm and, presently, stifling, but in a sense that helped. It created a false sense of confinement, of intimacy, and it made one drink the more, as if the drink would in some mysterious way reduce body temperature.

Wade sought out Shirley, who seemed to be having adhesion trouble with Barlow, of *Outlook* news desk. Barlow went off to get more drinks, at which point Wade took over and shepherded her into the quietest corner he could find. Shirley was already a trifle glistening, in eyes and complexion. She had been drinking quickly and the pervading warmth was having its effect.

"Having a good time?" Wade asked.

She smiled knowingly. "What's the matter, Phil? Jealous of young Barlow?"

"Well, no. All the same, Barlow is quite a character in his own way."

"I think I like it that way."

"Shirley, the night is still young. Better take it easy."

"I've been taking it easy for too many years, Phil. The older I get the more I think that soon enough I'll be taking it easy for evermore."

"Well, well, well . . ." Wade said in mild reproof. "The life and soul of the party."

Shirley produced a pack of cigarettes and held them out. Wade took two and put one in her mouth. He produced a lighter and they both lit up.

"I just have a feeling about things," Shirley said tonelessly. "I don't know quite how you'd analyze it . . ."

"I wouldn't," Wade interposed.

"I've been adding two and two together somewhere down in my subconscious mind, and, well . . ." She shrugged helplessly. "Stenniger wouldn't get out for fun. There must be a good reason."

"Sure. Hard cash."

"More than that, Stenniger was never short of cash."

"Earthquakes?"

"They're only an outward symptom of something else, Phil. Last night I had a dream, and . . ."

Wade never heard the details of the dream, for Barlow returned at that moment, holding two glasses, and grinning effetely. His blond hair was a little awry, as if someone had ruffled it, and his movements were a trifle unsteady. Wade estimated that Barlow wouldn't remain upright for much longer than you could count on an egg-timer.

Barlow pushed one of the glasses into Shirley's hands, slopping some of the contents on to the gray floor carpet.

"Been looking everywhere for you, Shirley," he said. Then, appar-

ently, he caught sight of Wade for the first time. "I see I've got competition."

Wade exchanged glances with Shirley, then, a little unchivalrously, excused himself and withdrew. From halfway across the crowded room he glanced back and caught a glimpse of Barlow breathing down Shirley's neck (or so it seemed) and holding on to her with one arm. He smiled sardonically. The evening was still young and Barlow would never make it.

He went over to the nearest bar.

He never quite made it. As he reached the bar he was astonished to see a cluster of glasses tremble of their own volition; a moment later a tall bottle of sherry suddenly fell over on to its side. And then the room was a bedlam of shrieks and noises, and the floor seemed to be shaking violently beneath his feet. He looked around wildly.

The entire human content of the room was moving in a slow but powerful surge towards the door. Overhead the pendant lamp was swinging to and fro in abrupt jagged motions. The floor shook again, and abruptly the lights went out.

Wade cursed furiously for a moment, then pushed his way forward through the darkness towards the corner where he had last seen Shirley. Ahead of him and on all sides, it seemed, was a rolling tide of shouting and screaming humanity. Panic seemed to pluck at his mind, but he resisted it in a mood of grim defiance. The floor had stopped shaking and the earthquake was over, but still the people around him fought their frantic way towards the exit.

He did something that surprised himself. He turned around and

fumbled his way back to the bar.

In the flickering glow from his cigarette lighter he selected a bottle of Scotch, then, placing the lighter on the bar surface, proceeded to empty as much whiskey as possible into the largest glass he could find. He replaced the bottle and was about to raise the glass to his lips when a familiar voice came to him from out of the darkness.

"Pour one for me, too, Phil. I need it."

He turned round towards the voice and found Shirley very close to him. It was the most natural thing in the world, he thought. He reached out with his hand, and extinguished the lighter, then, as the darkness swooped upon them, pulled her towards him. They kissed for a long time.

In the course of time someone brought candles, and the stalwarts began to filter back into the deserted room. Wade and Shirley ignored the excited chatter. The earthquake was already something remote, something in another dimension of space. With the return of light they relinquished their embrace and concentrated once more on the serious business of drinking. For Wade it was a matter of priority. The blood was still racing in his arteries and for what he had to do he needed alcohol—enough to make him irresponsible. Enough to make him forget the commitments and responsibilities of the outside world.

"Shirley," said Wade quietly, "I'll take you home."

She seemed to shiver against him, and her fingers tightened on his arm. He glanced at his wrist watch. The time was just a little after nine. Janet would be wor-

ried, but she wouldn't be expecting him yet, earthquake or no earthquake. She wouldn't be expecting him for a long time. Maybe he could phone her, just to make sure everything was all right, and to justify his absence for the next two or three hours.

He led the way to the exit, seeing only shapes in the candle-light. Shirley followed close behind him.

He found his car where he had parked it at the rear of Jason's Court. He switched on the engine, and pulled slowly away from the curb, advancing cautiously into the circle of light cast by the headlamps, driving steadily enough, but conscious of a certain instability in his movements and in his self-control. He turned into Fleet Street and accelerated towards the Strand.

"Where to, Shirley?" he asked.

"Lawrence Avenue—just off Maida Vale."

Shirley said softly, "It's only a small flat, but comfortable. I make good coffee, Phil. You'd like some coffee, wouldn't you?"

"Sure would," he replied.

She snuggled closer to him.

"I knew it would happen this way tonight, Phil. It had to happen sooner or later, and somehow . . . well, Stenniger, and the earthquake . . ."

Driving through a night unrelieved by light was something of a strain, he found. A sobering strain. There was no obvious sign of further earthquake damage, but electricity supplies seemed to have been cut off throughout North London. By the time he reached Maida Vale his earlier mood of calculated abandon had evaporated, and he found himself thinking more and more about his wife and his son. A nagging sense of guilt began to

obsess his mind. Supposing they were in danger, perhaps injured? Supposing the house had been damaged, or even destroyed? Or, even if nothing untoward had happened, supposing they were just waiting in the darkness, alarmed and anxious, waiting for him to telephone, waiting for him to come home?

"Just here," said Shirley. "The second block on the left."

He stopped the car outside her door, then looked at the pale outline of her face in the gloom.

"Shirley," he said, "I was wondering . . ."

"Yes, Phil?"

"Well—maybe I ought to go on home. Maybe something has happened to Janet and David. . . ."

She came closer to him, and touched his cheek. "Forget it, Phil. They're safe. Bound to be." Her lips brushed against his, and the sweet scent of gin hovered ephemerally in the air.

"Come on in," she continued. "I'll make you that coffee I promised."

He stroked her hair gently, but it was a mechanical gesture, as cold as the night.

"An hour ago I'd have said yes, Shirley. Since then I've had time to think. Somehow . . . tonight isn't the night."

"You're wrong, Phil. Tonight has to be the night. We'd have been at the party until eleven, or later. Phil—what's the time?"

He looked at his watch, couldn't see it, so flicked his lighter. The time was nine-twenty-five. He glanced quickly at Shirley's face, close to his.

"There's time enough," she said.

He put the lighter back in his pocket and turned away from her. Her hand moved softly over his

shoulder. She hesitated and then—

"Don't you want me, Phil?"

He took her hand and pressed it tightly. "I can't do it, Shirley. I get so far. The image is there, and I make the first action to produce the reality—and then it just evaporates."

"Conscience?"

"Not so simple as that. Some inbred standard, perhaps. A kind of criterion of conduct."

"Phil, you're trying to invent fancy reasons, but the truth is you just don't want me. Am I too old—too senile—too sexless?"

He reached out for her in the darkness and held her tight for a few moments. "Don't be silly, Shirley. You're a very desirable woman, and I'm most conscious of it."

"You sound," she said, "like a doctor making a diagnosis."

"You might be right at that."

"But I don't feel like a patient, Phil."

He released and fumbled in his pocket for cigarettes. He felt for her lips, placing a cigarette gently between them. They lit up together.

A minute or so later she said: "Phil—forget about everything. I'm just being sociable. Let me make you some coffee."

"No," he said decisively.

"All right, Phil. I'm sorry I made myself seem cheap."

He kissed her slowly, cautiously. "That's not true, either."

"Then why?"

"I don't know. Some other day, perhaps. Right now—it's just the wrong place at the wrong time."

She laughed ironically. "There'll never be another day, Phil. . . ." She moved away from him, and he heard the nearside door of the car open.

"Good night, Phil," she said.

"Good night, Shirley."

The door slammed and she merged into the night. Slowly, pensively, he engaged the gears and let in the clutch. The car moved softly into the darkness.

"Fool," he said to himself, and yet, strangely enough, he felt pleased.

4. The Shape of Chaos

THERE was another earth tremor during the night, and still another the following morning, but Janet seemed to be taking it stoically enough, and David regarded it as a novelty. Wade stayed home until midday, rigging up a crude battery-operated emergency lighting system. During the morning electricity supplies were restored, but he finished his self-imposed task, went out to the local shopping center to buy batteries, then tested the circuit. At all events there would be light in the future, come earthquake or come the end of the world.

In the afternoon he went into the office, to find Pete Willis waiting for him with a pile of page proofs from the printing works. The next issue of *Outlook* was already on the presses, awaiting the final okay before the machines started running. Wade settled down to work.

An hour later Willis came in again to collect the corrected proofs.

"Fine," said Wade. "Mainly clean. You can phone the corrections."

Willis took the proofs and flicked through them.

"Good party," he remarked casually.

"Not bad," Wade agreed.

"Trust Stenniger to include an earthquake. He always did do things in a spectacular way."

Wade grunted in a non-committal manner.

He made no effort to avoid Shirley during the next few days, but strangely enough he didn't see her at all. Once or twice he was prompted to call her on the intercom in the usual way, to indulge in a little harmless backchat, or even to invite her to lunch with him, but somehow he didn't seem to get around to it.

One afternoon the telephone rang and a strange female voice spoke to him in the earpiece.

"Mr. Philip Wade?"

"Speaking."

"Hold on, sir. There's a call for you."

An interval of some fifteen seconds, then a smooth male voice, pitched low, that purred in remote feline overtones.

"Mr. Wade?"

"Speaking."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Wade. This is Sir Hubert Piercey."

Wade was taken aback for a few moments.

"I was wondering," said Sir Hubert, "if you would care to discuss certain matters with me. Mr. Stenniger suggested that you might be interested."

"Yes, of course," said Wade abruptly.

"Very well. Supposing you call here at my office at your convenience. Ask for Department Five of the International Bureau of Information. At Imperial Court in Whitehall Crescent."

"Yes, said Wade.

"When?"

"Whenever you like, Sir Hubert."

"Today? Are you free?"

"Yes."

"Very well, Mr. Wade. This afternoon, say at three o'clock."

"Yes—I'll be there," Wade said. He hung up in a faint daze.

Imperial Court, according to the gilt-lettered sign at the main entrance, was the abode of several government departments. The International Bureau of Information appeared to be a recent addition to the list, for the gilt was new and shiny. Wade noted with interest that the Bureau occupied two floors at the top of the building.

Sir Hubert's office was buffered by two elegant anterooms governed by two even more elegant female secretaries. But it was a cold, austere elegance, and their voices were impersonal to the point of disembodiment. If Mr. Wade would care to take a seat they would find out if Sir Hubert was available. An appointment? A condescending smile. An appointment did not necessarily mean that Sir Hubert could be turned on and off like a tap. The appointment was merely an opening gambit. The final act of meeting Sir Hubert could be likened to checkmate in a complex game of chess. They didn't say so, but it was implicit in their tone of voice, Wade thought. However, he got to see Sir Hubert in less than twenty minutes.

Sir Hubert was a small man, a shrunken man, not more than sixty, but with young, restless eyes that moved with quick birdlike motions behind heavy lids. He was bald, and his pink domed head seemed to have been pressed in plastic. His nose was long and inquisitive, but his lips were thin and not brimming with humanitarianism. His clothes were dark

and immaculate, with white collar and silver gray tie.

The office was smaller than the reading room of the British Museum, and the carpet wasn't so deep as a snowdrift, but it was of similar color—an attractive off-white with contemporary shapes scarcely visible in pallid green. The desk in glass and chrome looked like a tesseract, and the telephones were in different colors, like a captive rainbow. The windows were orthodox and for that reason they looked out of place.

"I'll try to be brief, Mr. Wade," said Sir Hubert. "I am currently engaged in establishing a new government department which will have considerable ramifications throughout the civilized world. Indeed, one might say that it is merely one department of a new kind of international organization. My main concern at the present time is to recruit suitable staff, and that, I can assure you, is no easy task."

Sir Hubert blew his nose on a large blue handkerchief. Wade shifted restlessly in his chair and wished that he could smoke.

"The International Bureau of Information is part of a worldwide intelligence network—a kind of world brain linking the civilized centers of the world. Through the channels of communication certain vital information passes. This information has to be collected and collated and interpreted. World governments rely absolutely on the information which they receive from us, and from other I.B.I. centers in other countries. We also act as a filter, passing approved information to the news agencies and broadcasting services, or, in some cases, withholding information."

"You want me to become part of

this—this filter?" Wade asked.

"Yes, I do," Sir Hubert said crisply. He crossed to the desk and picked up a green folder, referring briefly to the contents. "Naturally we have already checked on you—more than you might imagine. You are an American by birth—educated in New Jersey until you were eleven years old. Your father died, and your mother, who was English, brought you back to London. We've checked on your school records. They are adequate. Your war record as a bomber pilot is even better. We know about your wife and son, and we know about your career in magazine journalism. We know a great deal about your psychological make-up—a tendency towards alcoholism, for instance..."

Wade smiled grimly and without embarrassment.

"There will be further tests—complete physiological and psychiatric examinations. We are interested in a certain type of personality—certain essential requirements of basic psychology. We think you might fill those requirements.

"So what do you want me to do, Sir Hubert?"

"There are two things you must do immediately, and both demand a rather difficult decision." Sir Hubert replaced the folder on his desk and walked around the room with his hands clasped behind his back. "If I had not thought you capable of making these decisions, you would not now be sitting in this office."

"Thank you, sir," Wade felt prompted to say.

Sir Hubert stopped walking around, and turned to face the other man squarely.

He said: "First I need to know whether you are prepared to send

your wife and son away for an indefinite period."

"Away . . . ?"

"Out of the country."

Wade frowned, bewildered. "But—where?"

"To a government domestic camp in the Arctic."

Wade stared blankly at the other man for several seconds.

"If you are to work for us then it must be done," Sir Hubert stated firmly.

"But—why?"

"There are very good reasons which will be explained to you in due course. For the moment I require a positive assurance . . ."

"But how can I give you an assurance?" Wade demanded. "My wife has some say in the matter. If it doesn't make sense to me it certainly won't to her."

"It's up to you to make it seem sensible. You have to convince her that it is necessary—urgently necessary."

"I'm afraid you don't know my wife, Sir Hubert," Wade said sardonically.

Sir Hubert was not amused that Wade could notice. His expression could hardly have been sterner at that moment.

"Let me put it this way, Mr. Wade. We are on the brink of a world crisis of unimaginable proportions. Governments all over the world are busy recruiting reliable staffs to cope with this crisis. In order to relieve the personnel concerned of all worry and anxiety about their families, steps have been taken to evacuate those families to areas of maximum safety. Believe me, it is in your own interests to do exactly as I say."

"I need time to think about it," Wade said. "What you are asking just doesn't seem reasonable."

"Inside three months it will be only too reasonable. Now for the second point—I want you to decide, here and now, whether you are going to accept the post I am offering."

"But I don't even know what the post is. . . ."

"It will exploit your journalistic ability and your power of imagination."

"But, Sir Hubert—aren't there other details to consider. The sordid matter of salary, for instance. . . ."

Sir Hubert smiled for the first time. "You can have all the money you want, Mr. Wade. In a few weeks it will be worthless, anyway. Well, what's your answer?"

"I don't know what to say," Wade murmured uneasily. "If I knew a little more about it. . . ."

"I can tell you nothing more at this stage. But, without saying a word, I can show you this."

Sir Hubert returned to his desk and opened a drawer, from which he took a small flat object that resembled a large wallet. He handed it to Wade in silence.

It was a flexible folder, pocket-sized, in black plastic material. Wade opened it slowly. Inside were three printed booklets contained in a pouch. He removed them.

They were of identical shape, and they all contained printed coupons on perforated pages, and at the tops of the pages were headings which announced: *First Period*—*Second Period*—and so on. The coupons in each of the books were printed on paper of different colors.

On the cover of each book was an official crown, with a title in bold black letters. The first book said: *Food—Basic and Supplementary Coupons*. The second stated:

Fuel—Oil, Petrol, Coal, Coke—Basic Only.

And on the cover of the third book was one word only—*Water*.

Slowly Wade replaced the booklets in the pouch and handed the wallet back to Sir Hubert. Both men looked at each other for some considerable time, saying nothing, but aware of a subtle change in the atmosphere of the interview.

"They're ration books, of course," Wade said presently. It was a statement made without inflection, a mere registering of the act of recognition.

"Fifty million of them have been printed," Sir Hubert explained. "One of the biggest secret operations of all time. Not only in this country, but everywhere. America, Europe, Asia. All over the world there must be nearly two billion sets of basic ration books ready for distribution."

Wade shrugged helplessly. "But, Sir Hubert, why? What's it all about?"

Sir Hubert replaced the ration books on his desk and returned with a pale blue printed form which he handed to Wade. It appeared to be an official agreement of some kind with space at the bottom for a signature. Wade read it quickly, sensing in advance the meaning of the formal sentences. He glanced at Sir Hubert.

"If I sign this I take it I'm enrolled?" he said.

Sir Hubert nodded. "If you sign you accept unconditionally and without question the authority of the Bureau. You accept an absolute discipline, and you obey orders without question. In return we offer security for you and your family, and an eventual reunion with your wife and son when your period of duty is over."

"So that's the bargain," Wade said solemnly. "Loyalty in exchange for security." A pause, then: "Do you honestly believe things are going to be as bad as that?"

"Worse," said Sir Hubert quietly. "Much worse."

Wade pulled his fountain pen from his breast pocket.

"I'll sign," he said.

Wade spent the remainder of the day at Imperial Court. The pale blue form might have been a military recruiting form, so quickly and efficiently did the wheels begin to turn. Without saying anything further, Sir Hubert had passed him on to a Mr. Jaffe, a tall bony man with dreamy eyes, who asked innumerable questions and wrote the answers on a large folded form headed *Attestation*. By the time he had finished the form was virtually Wade's biography.

From there he was escorted by one of the elegant secretaries into the basement of the building, where, surprisingly, there was a well-equipped clinic. Two doctors examined him with painstaking care, and X-rays were taken. Wade was just beginning to feel like a biological specimen on a microscope slide when he was told to dress.

The next process in the machinery of recruitment was a psycho-neural examination during which an attractive mature woman in a white smock made recordings of his brain activity on an electroencephalograph.

After that came a long and tiring question and answer session with an elderly psychiatrist. A microphone on the desk was connected to a tape recorder on a small table to the rear, and Wade observed that the tape spools were

rotating. Officialdom was certainly taking no chances with Philip Wade.

At ten minutes past five the machinery came to a halt; all examinations had been completed and Wade was conducted back to Sir Hubert's office. Sir Hubert eyed him speculatively, then waved him into a chair. He smiled without moving his lips.

"I suppose you've had enough of the routine, Mr. Wade."

"I guess so."

"Never mind. I can assure you that it is necessary."

Wade pondered for a moment, then said: "I get the feeling that all this was predetermined—that you knew I'd sign that you knew exactly how I'd react."

Sir Hubert allowed his hands to flutter vaguely. "We can't afford to take chances. We select our personnel in accordance with reliable psychological principles. If I had had any doubts whatever I should never have shown you those ration books."

"I still don't know what it all adds up to," Wade said resentfully. "My main feeling is . . ."

"I know," Sir Hubert interrupted. "You feel you've been—what is the expression?—railroaded. . . ."

"Railroaded into a job I didn't ask for. What worries me is what I'm going to tell my wife. Are you serious about this Arctic evacuation business?"

"Absolutely serious. At this very moment a vast airlift is in operation, flying thousands of women and children to Zones D and E in the Arctic. Don't worry about the conditions, Mr. Wade. The Arctic camps are very up to date. Atomic reactors supply a communal heating system, and they are comfortable in a mildly austere way. I'll

tell you this—your wife and son will be much happier in the Arctic than those who are left behind will be, and in not too many weeks."

"What exactly is going to happen, Sir Hubert?"

"You will be fully informed when your attestation papers are approved."

"When is that likely to be?"

"Tomorrow—probably in the afternoon."

"And what about my job as editor of *Outlook*?"

"It will cease, as from tomorrow."

Wade frowned and bit his lip. "Officially I'm supposed to give one month's notice...."

Sir Hubert smiled ironically. "Only one month? Mr. Holtz evidently doesn't value you as much as we do. However, you need not worry. The Bureau will deal with any problems arising from matters of contract."

"And so far as my wife and son are concerned, when would they be expected to—leave for the Arctic?"

Sir Hubert regarded him steadily. "Assuming your attestation papers are approved, they would leave, say, in three days."

Wade rocketed out of his chair, momentarily horrified. Sir Hubert waved a pacifying hand at him. "Four days, if you prefer it. Even a week. But time is getting short, and air reservations are becoming difficult. I strongly recommend you to leave the matter to me. It is more urgent than you imagine."

Wade stood up, a little weakly. "All right, Sir Hubert. I'll do my best. I suppose you want me to talk to my wife today...."

"The sooner the better."

"Okay, I'll try—but I don't think it will work."

"It will work—provided you go

home sober," said Sir Hubert brusquely.

Wade nodded doubtfully.

"I'll be contacting you tomorrow," Sir Hubert went on. "Meanwhile, don't be deceived by the normal appearance of the everyday world around you. It is a veneer that will soon be stripped off."

Wade shook hands with Sir Hubert and went home.

He entered the house with a greater sense of proprietorship than usual, probably because he realized that to some extent the future of the house was a function of his own immediate future. It was a house destined to become deserted, desolated—not for any tangible reason that one could produce as evidence, but because of a number of correlated sinister events over the entire planet.

Janet was ironing, and she looked tired and pale. He kissed her formally.

"You're early, Phil," she said.

He said quietly: "I spent all afternoon in a government department in Whitehall. I came straight home."

She glanced briefly at him but made no comment.

"I had an interview with Sir Hubert Piercy, followed by medical and psychological examinations. How would you like it if I were to become a government official?"

She turned to him, smiling. "I'd like it fine, but why should they pick you, Phil?"

"You never did believe Stenger, did you?"

"Not very much."

"Well, he was on the level, Janet. Sir Hubert has me lined up for a job."

"What kind of a job?"

she snuggled. "I don't really know as yet. It had to do with information services, press liaison, censorship, and so on."

Janet returned to her ironing. "Funny kind of job, if you ask me. I mean, not knowing exactly what it amounts to. Did Sir Hubert mention salary?"

"It's unimportant. He said I could have whatever I asked, but it won't be worth anything in a few months."

"It will be worth something to me," she stated.

"That's just the point, my dear. This is more than the mere question of a job. It's a development of what you might call the world situation. New government departments are being set up, and there are all the indications of a powerful machinery being established—to control the population. The same thing is happening in other countries."

She looked at him seriously, not interrupting.

"Sir Hubert showed me something unbelievable this afternoon, Janet. Ration books. For food, fuel—and water. There's a big crisis coming up, and the government are taking steps to deal with it."

There was no incredulity in her expression—just calm, sober interest.

"I don't know the whole story, but I can make one or two intelligent guesses. It seems that I was pretty near to the truth when I wrote that *Outlook* feature on the Nutcracker H-bomb tests. The bed of the Pacific Ocean was fractured, and water is pouring into cavities inside the earth. Slowly enough, maybe, but at the same time fast enough to cause a significant fall in water level all over the world. In a few months most of the ports

and harbors of the world are going to be useless. Shipping will be paralyzed. And for a country like ours which depends so much on imports, that's a serious matter."

Janet nodded slowly; he had never known her so attentive.

"According to Sir Hubert things are going to be bad. He seems to think there will be a shortage of water as well as food, and things like coal and petrol and oil will be in short supply, which will mean that industry will grind to a halt."

"That's reasonable," she said quietly. "Naturally there would have to be a kind of Ministry of Information to put out reassuring propaganda—to try to make things seem better than they are."

"That would seem to be the general idea," Wade agreed.

"I think you'd better take the job, Phil," she said.

He finished his cigarette and flicked the stub into the grate. A minor detail of fact crystallized momentarily in his mind. If shipping became paralyzed there could be no more tobacco imports and therefore no more cigarettes. It was a bleak thought.

"There's more to it yet, Janet," he said. "There are strings attached." He considered for a few seconds, seeking the proper words to express what was in his mind. "The government are anxious to safeguard their own personnel, and their families. They have a plan to evacuate close relatives of their officials—to a place of safety...."

"Where?"

"Well—they're building special camps with all facilities, and there'll be plenty of food and everything. . . ."

"But where?"

"In the Arctic."

"You mean—that David and I

are supposed to go to one of these—these Arctic camps—and leave you here alone."

"I'm afraid so, Janet."

She put her hands to her cheeks theatrically, regarding him solemnly.

"When would we have to go?" Janet asked.

"Sir Hubert said in about three days."

"That doesn't leave much time."

"He said a big airlift was in operation and that reservations were getting difficult. There really isn't a minute to spare."

She seemed to sigh internally in some intimate and personal gesture of resignation. He wanted to go to her and hold her in his arms, and console her and reassure her, but he did nothing.

"When will you see Sir Hubert again?" she asked.

"Tomorrow afternoon."

She came towards him and put one hand gently on his shoulder. "I have to leave it to you, Phil. We're in your hands, David and I."

"It's your decision, Janet," he said firmly, but she shook her head.

"You're so wrong, Phil. Why don't you ever like to face up to responsibility? I'm your wife and David's your son and we'll do whatever you say."

He stood up, vaguely irritated, inhaling deeply on his cigarette. "Janet, we're not living in feudal times. You and I are individuals and I wouldn't want to dictate to you. . . ."

"You've missed the point, Phil, as usual. Don't you see, all I know about any of this business is what you tell me? I'm taking you on trust. If you think Sir Hubert is right and that there is a real and

terrible crisis on the way, then I'll do whatever you say."

"I don't know what to think," Wade said, and, indeed, he found himself curiously objective towards the entire situation. Did he really take Sir Hubert seriously? At any rate he had signed the recruitment paper, but—and here an uneasy misgiving trembled in his abdomen—it was always possible that he had signed in order to take the easy way out. Even Shirley had accused him of being weak. "I'll have to consider it," he added vaguely. "It will need a lot of thinking about."

"Don't think for too long, Phil," Janet said. "I know you're a good thinker, but sometimes you have to act, too. And this might be one of those times."

5. The Censor Clamp

THE next day things began to move. It was as if invisible forces had been at work overnight, severing the ties that held him secure in the present. Willis, for instance, was sitting in his office when he arrived, sitting at Wade's own desk, dictating letters to Betty. He looked up when Wade entered, and grinned foolishly.

"Sorry, Phil," he said apologetically. "I seem to be promoted, or something."

"Congratulations," Wade said, with irony. "What do I do? Sit on the floor?"

"Holtz wants to see you. He came in early—around eight-thirty. First thing I knew he'd ordered me to take over the editorship of *Outlook*."

Wade eyed the other man thoughtfully, but said nothing.

"He looked worried," Willis continued. "What have you been up to, Phil?"

"When I find out, I'll tell you."

Wade went to see Holtz. He was sitting at Stenniger's old desk, surrounded by paper, and writing meticulously with a cheap ballpen on a sheet of quarto paper. He smiled at Wade and waved him into a chair.

"Good morning, Mr. Wade," Holtz said pleasantly. "I suppose I ought to be angry with you, but I am not a man who angers easily."

"Anything wrong, Mr. Holtz?" Wade asked.

Holtz stood up and crossed to the window, turning his back on Wade. "I'm rather disappointed in you. I was relying on you to remain with us, to guide the destiny of *Outlook* in the future as you have done in the past. Consequently you will realize that it was rather a shock to me when Sir Hubert Piercey telephoned me at my home last night."

He turned to face Wade, and there was accusation in his eyes.

Wade shrugged his shoulders. "Until yesterday I didn't know a thing about it, Mr. Holtz, so help me. Only vague hearsay and rumors. Even now I don't know for certain . . ."

"Sir Hubert seemed very certain. He asked me—indeed, he instructed me—to release you forthwith. I only hope you are doing the right thing, Mr. Wade. I had high hopes of you. With this organization your future could have been very bright."

"What exactly did Sir Hubert say?"

"Is there any need for me to explain? Yesterday you were interviewed and examined for some important but undefined govern-

ment post, and you have been accepted."

"I haven't been notified as yet."

"No doubt you will be. Sir Hubert asked me to waive the customary month's notice of resignation. He may have very good reasons, but it still leaves this company in a difficult position. On a monthly periodical it wouldn't be quite so important, but on a weekly. . . . I've appointed Willis as editor pending an official appointment. I hope he is competent."

"He's competent enough," Wade pronounced wearily.

"Then there's nothing more to be said, Mr. Wade. Under the circumstances we can hardly pay you a month's salary. . . ."

Wade put up an arm. "I understand, Mr. Holtz. But look here—I've heard nothing definite from Sir Hubert. So far as I'm concerned nothing has changed. . . ."

"But it has," Holtz insisted. "*Outlook* has a new editor as from this morning. Good-bye, Mr. Wade."

Wade left the office angrily. Sir Hubert had been too damned high-handed, he thought. It was one thing to make the offer of a job, but quite another to sabotage an existing job—a good enough job at that. He went to his own office and, ignoring Willis, lifted the phone and dialled the operator.

"Get me Sir Hubert Piercey at the International Bureau of Information at Imperial Court in Whitehall Crescent," he said.

Thirty seconds later he was talking to Sir Hubert.

"Philip Wade here," he announced aggressively. "I've just been talking to Mr. Holtz. . . ."

"Excellent!" Sir Hubert's voice was remote and resonant over the line. "So you know all about it."

"All I know is that things have been happening behind my back."

It seemed to Wade that Sir Hubert chuckled. "Perhaps our methods are somewhat unconventional, but don't let it worry you, Mr. Wade. Naturally I had to take steps to insure that you would be available immediately, and that meant going over your head, direct to Holtz. I've just had the attestation report in from the security people. You're in, Mr. Wade. As from now you're a government employee."

Wade hesitated, uncertain as to how he ought to react. "Well," he said reluctantly, "I think it's high-handed to say the least. Supposing I'd decided to decline your offer?"

"You can't, Mr. Wade. You signed a document, remember. It happens to be legally binding."

"So what am I supposed to do next?"

"You are to report to a Colonel Brindle at Room Five in the Consort Building in Kingsway. He will assume responsibility for you from now on."

"When am I supposed to see this Colonel Brindle?"

"As soon as you are ready. Now, if you like."



"Very well," Wade said reluctantly. "I'll go there now."

He hung up and eyed Willis solemnly.

"Best of luck, Pete," he murmured.

Willis grinned boyishly. "Well, thanks. But what's it all about, Phil? Have you been fired?"

"Frankly I'm not at all sure what it's all about, but one thing's certain—you've got yourself an editorial chair. I hope it lasts a long time."

"You sound as if you don't think it will. . . ."

"I'm sure it will—as long as civilization itself lasts."

Willis regarded him questioningly, but Wade made an enigmatic face and pushed his hands deep into his pockets.

"I've got things to do," he said. "I'll be back sometime to pick up a few personal belongings. Meanwhile . . ."

Willis raised his eyebrows in surprise. "On the level, Phil? You're really leaving?"

"I've already left," Wade said sourly.

On the way out of the building he looked in on Shirley Sye, but she wasn't in her office. Walking slowly down the stairs he encountered her secretary, who was coming up with an armful of folders.

"Mrs. Sye around?" he inquired.

The girl shook her head, peering at him through butterfly-framed spectacles. "She's gone over to the Dorchester, Mr. Wade. The Brunot spring collection is being modelled."

"Never mind," Wade said. "I'll see her some other time."

Going out of the main entrance he paused, and looked back. Then he turned and headed quickly out into Fleet Street.

He walked the full length of the

street towards Aldwych and Kingsway, not minding the rain, looking around him with eyes that held more than a hint of melancholy. Moving out of Fleet Street was like emigrating, and he was conscious of a deep emotional wrench. At Chancery Lane, however, the mood began to pass off, and by the time he had walked beyond the Law Courts his mind had turned towards the future.

Seven minutes later he entered the Consort Building in Kingsway.

From the outside the Consort Building resembled any ordinary office block, with rows of steel-framed rectangular windows rising six storeys above the street. He had not walked more than four paces into the spacious entrance hall when he was intercepted by a uniformed guard who looked him up and down without compassion.

"Mr. Philip Wade to see Colonel Brindle in Room Five," Wade stated cheerfully.

He followed the guard across the entrance hall to beyond the elevator and down a wide corridor at the end of which was a double door. At the other side of the door was a carpeted staircase leading downwards, then another double door, and another corridor. Finally the guard stopped outside a glass-panelled door bearing the legend: *Colonel Brindle—Chief of Intelligence Division—International Bureau of Information*.

The guard tapped on the door and went in. A moment later he reappeared and nodded briefly at Wade.

Wade went into the office.

It was a large office, without windows, flooded with light from half a dozen grilles fluorescents hanging from the high ceiling. The

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walls were gray and covered with a patchwork of large maps, and some of the maps were peppered with little colored flags. At one end of the room was a big square table with another map on it, and at the other end another table with two teleprinters, one of which was clicking merrily away to itself and pushing paper intermittently from its roller.

Colonel Brindle's desk was set midway between the two tables—a long and imposing desk with a glass top, supporting an unreasonable quantity of telephones and intercom switchboard units. And behind this mass of communications equipment sat the Colonel himself—in sober civilian clothes, Wade was surprised to note. He was a tall angular man, poised uncomfortably on his swivel chair, with thin graying hair, a long sad jaw, and a pair of the bluest eyes Wade had ever seen. He stood up as Wade came in, leaning stiffly across the desk and extending a long arm.

Wade shook hands firmly, noting that the Colonel had fingers of steel.

"Good of you to get here so soon," said Brindle in a voice that sounded too gentle for the big bony

body from which it came. "Sit down."

Wade sat down facing the Colonel.

"I won't waste time," Brindle went on. "As from this moment you are working for me, and you're not likely to see anything more of Sir Hubert Piercey. Your official status here is Deputy Intelligence Officer. You'll be immediately responsible to Major Carey, but you won't see much of him because he'll be travelling round a great deal. There will be more documents for you to sign to make the whole thing watertight. . . ." He broke off and moved his lips into what resembled the shape of a grin. "And watertight is the precise word, believe me, Wade."

Wade nodded. There didn't seem to be anything to say.

"You'll be on open salary—which means you can draw what you like each week, within limits. We don't want you to go buying half a dozen Jaguars, naturally, but we want you to have everything you need. In this kind of job money is a very minor consideration."

"I see."

"You'll have an office overlooking the Intelligence Filter Room. That's the nerve center of this building. We have radio-teleprinter links with every corner of the world, and every link is jammed with signal traffic. All signals are encoded. You'll act in close liaison with the Code and Cypher Division."

"Fine—but what exactly do I have to do?" Wade asked.

"You'll get full instruction later. Generally speaking you do much the same kind of job as you've been doing in Fleet Street. You'll assess the value and significance of

all incoming signals, and integrate them into one comprehensive picture of the world situation."

"You mean—like fitting the pieces into a jig-saw?"

"More or less. We think you'll be good at that kind of work. You did it pretty effectively in the pages of *Outlook*."

"Well—thanks."

"You'll also be responsible for releasing news to the press and public broadcasting channels—only it won't be news, it will be propaganda designed to maintain the national morale."

"So it's that kind of crisis?"

Colonel Brindle stood up and crossed to one of the wall maps, beckoning Wade to follow him. Wade went over to the map. Brindle was pointing to a large blue expanse that was obviously the Pacific Ocean.

"Right here," he said in a matter-of-fact tone of voice, "is a fracture in the ocean bed, centered on Kaluiki. We've been able to make some measurements, in between earthquakes. The fracture is about two thousand miles long and it gets bigger every day."

He stared bleakly at Wade. "It's an automatic cycle. As the water pours into cavities beneath the ocean bed it causes cooling of the hot interior. The resulting contractions combined with steam pressure blow open further cracks, and so it goes on."

"You mean—it will never stop?"

"Only when there isn't any more water left to pour through the cracks. In other words—when the oceans have run dry."

For a moment Wade found himself at a loss for words. Presently he said: "But is that likely to happen? Seriously, I mean."

"Inside three months. Probably less."

"But sea level is only dropping very slowly. . . ."

"Was," Brindle stated emphatically. "There has been an alarming increase in the rate since the earthquakes in the western hemisphere. We haven't yet been able to make a complete investigation, but we believe the Pacific shocks have opened up a structural flaw in the bed of the Atlantic."

"If that is true . . ."

"If it's true we can expect more and more earthquakes on both sides of the world, and the water will drain away more and more rapidly. According to the latest measurements and statistics, it has already started. Sea level is down by more than ten feet. There are only two ports in these islands capable of accepting shipping of more than ten-thousand tons displacement. By the end of next week it will be done by twenty feet, perhaps more, and a week or two later you'll be able to walk to France if you feel so inclined."

"I can see," Wade said solemnly, "that this is going to be a serious matter for everyone."

Brindle shaped his lips again into one of his rare ironic smiles. "That is probably the understatement of all time. You may not realize it yet, Wade, but mankind is about to fight his most violent and vicious rearguard action. There can only be a few survivors, and they'll be the lucky ones who can get to the polar regions."

"You mean—because of the water?"

"Exactly. If the oceans go, there will be no more rain, because rain is simply water vapor evaporated from the ocean surface. No rain means no clouds, and that

means a hot dry summer. Lakes and rivers will dry out—for ever. There will be an end to agriculture and an end to livestock—except in the Arctic and Antarctic where there is plenty of water for tens of thousands of years, in the form of ice."

"I think I see the whole picture now," Wade said. "At least, all the disconnected pieces seem to tie up. That's something."

"There are a lot more pieces that you and I haven't even thought of yet." Brindle returned to his desk, and Wade to his chair. They sat down.

"Have they evacuated your family yet?" Brindle asked.

Wade shook his head.

"Better not delay too long. The situation is likely to explode overnight. I'll ring Sir Hubert and fix it."

"When?"

"You mean when will your family be leaving? Tomorrow, I hope. I'll do my best."

Wade pondered unhappily for a few seconds. "And what about us, Colonel? The people who are left behind?"

"Those who are left behind fall into two categories. The government officials, such as you and I, with the support of the police and the armed forces, will try to maintain law and order for as long as possible. There will have to be stringent rationing fairly administered. We shall be among the administrators. But in the end there will be a complete breakdown of civilization, and humanity will revert back to the law of the survival of the fittest. Before that happens we shall pull out and join our families in the Arctic bases."

"And the second category?"

"The mass of the people. Those

who are going to die, inevitably, before the year is out."

"Then—what's the point of trying to maintain law and order. Why not pull out now . . . ?"

Brindle stroked his nose thoughtfully. "That would hardly be either humanitarian or ethical, though I imagine the abstract graces will go by the board very quickly, in any case. No, Wade, we have to keep control over the situation because there is always the possibility that someone will find a solution to the problem. Scientists all over the world are trying to devise economical ways of pumping the water back from the sub-oceanic cavities, or laying pipelines to carry water from the polar regions to the civilized zones, or even synthesizing water from hydrogen and oxygen. With a tremendous technological effort it might be possible to pull the rabbit out of the hat in time."

"I hope to God they can do it," said Wade earnestly.

"And now," Brindle announced. "I'll take you to your office and introduce you to some of the people you will be working with."

Wade followed the other man out of the room.

The Intelligence Filter Room was a further two floors below ground and was either a converted basement, or, and this seemed more likely to Wade, a recent and purposeful extension to the building. The room had a functional appearance, as if it had been designed from first principles expressly for communications purposes.

Wade was only able to glance quickly around as he followed Brindle to a steel staircase leading up to a balcony. He was among teleprinters, about forty of them

arranged in orderly rows, and beyond them was a long switchboard with tiny flashing lights. There were girls and men operating the machines and supervising the switchboard. Behind the clatter of the keyboards he thought he could detect the faint whine of air conditioning plant; the atmosphere of the room was certainly cool and fresh.

They went into a door labelled *Intelligence*, and here was an anteroom with two girls and desks and typewriters and filing cabinets. In the far wall a metal door bore the sign: NO UNAUTHORIZED ADMISSION. Colonel Brindle pressed a red-topped button recessed into the wall, and the door slid silently to one side. They went through. A moment later the door closed behind them.

This was a short corridor, with two doors on either side. All the doors were labelled. To the right he saw *Code and Cypher Department*, and, further on, *Lieutenant Patten—Code and Cypher Officer*. on the left the first door announced *Major Carey—Intelligence Officer*, and on the second door was *Philip Wade—Deputy Intelligence Officer*. They went into his office.

It was a nice office—big and airy, with cool blue walls and a pure white ceiling with strip lights. The desk was cubic and modern, but not too much so. There were three telephones, black, white and green. The carpet was a regulation brown, but soft enough to sleep on. An enormous safe with a combination lock was built solidly into one wall, and a row of filing cabinets with ostentatious locks adorned another. There were maps too, with little flags, but they had not been positioned.

Brindle eyed Wade quizzically.
"Satisfactory?"

"Excellent."

He indicated a small intercom unit on the desk. "If you want a stenographer, or want to call the Cypher Officer, or Major Carey, or me—or if you just want coffee—use this."

"Do I have a secretary?" Wade asked.

"Sorry, no secretary. In a department like yours we can't afford to have too many people with inside knowledge. It's virtually a one-man job. Security reasons."

"I understand."

"All right," said Brindle. "We'll move on."

They returned to the corridor and entered the door with the sign *Lieutenant Patten—Code and Cypher Officer*. It was an office similar to his own, Wade observed, with a built-in safe and a bank of filing cabinets with large locks, but this office had been inhabited for some time, and the desk was untidy with papers and books.

Patten was a lean, bespectacled man, tall, but not so tall as Wade, with blond hair that bore the hint of a wave. He wore a faded gray suit and a Royal Air Force tie, but that was the only concession made to uniform. Wade wondered vaguely about the military titles of Patten and Brindle, but decided that they were wearing civilian clothes for some obscure reason of security. On the other hand he was unable to reconcile Patten's army rank of Lieutenant with the Air Force tie. He dismissed the matter with a mental shrug, and concentrated on the man himself.

"Glad to meet you, Wade," Patten said affably. "Things have been difficult with Major Carey be-

ing away so much. From now on everything should go smoothly."

"I hope you're right," Wade remarked.

Brindle said: "Lieutenant Patten has been handling a considerable amount of the intelligence side out of sheer necessity. He'll be able to show you the ropes."

"Only too pleased," Patten smiled.

"Your only means of contact with the communication network will be through the Cypher Office," Brindle went on. "All incoming and outgoing signals pass through Lieutenant Patten, or, in his absence, the chief cypher clerk, Miss Vance."

"I understand," Wade said.

"I'll leave you here now," said Brindle. "You and Patten will probably have a lot to talk about."

"Okay, Colonel."

Brindle left, and for a few moments Patten and Wade eyed each other with a certain reserve: it wasn't quite embarrassment, but rather the preliminary unconscious groping of two strangers for some point of psychic contact. Wade produced his cigarettes, and Patten accepted with a little too much gratitude. They lit up.

Patten glanced quickly at an old-fashioned pocket watch, then looked brightly at Wade. "It's nearly twelve. Tell you what. I'll show you the main Cypher Office and introduce you to Miss Vance, then what say we pop out for a beer and a bite?"

"Fine," said Wade, mentally substituting several whiskies for the beer.

"That way we can talk informally and I can put you in the picture as to the set-up here."

Patten led the way into the Cypher Office. Not much to see: a

big, austere room—two built-in safes—four large tables—four girls—curious machines that resembled oversized typewriters but were obviously some kind of mechanical coding device—and the inevitable filing cabinets.

"This is Miss Vance," said Patten.

Wade looked at Miss Vance. She was pert and attractive, with dark hair, rather short, and the suggestion of a fringe, and deep brown intelligent eyes. No cosmetic that you could notice, but a clear, youthful complexion that needed no enhancement. She wasn't beautiful and she wasn't glamorous, Wade thought, but she had that indefinite something, that mysterious feminine magnetism, that came over without artifices and without gimmicks. She dressed plainly, in black with a high white collar. The way she smiled was subtle, and she smiled with her eyes as well as her lips. Wade found this appealing.

"How do you do," Miss Vance said correctly, in a voice that was a delight to listen to.

Twenty-five—or perhaps twenty-six, Wade estimated. Almost young enough to be his own daughter. He broke through the spell of fascination that seemed to be binding him and inclined his head in a formal gesture.

"I regard Miss Vance as my deputy," said Patten. "She knows as much about the cypher side as I do—probably more. Once you've settled in you'll probably be seeing more of her than you will of me."

And that might be something to look forward to, Wade thought. He said: "I'm sure Miss Vance is most efficient and I imagine I'll be relying on her a great deal in due course."

"I'm sure you will," Patten remarked.

The girl smiled, and some polite crosstalk followed, and then Wade and Patten left the office and made their way towards the outside world.

6. The Widening Fissure

JANET and David left two days later. It was a quiet, restrained parting, with no tears or sentiment, and in a way rather formal. The Arctic airlift planes, an assorted fleet of four-engined and jet passenger and freight aircraft, were based at High Waltham airfield some thirty miles to the west of London. Wade drove his family over early in the morning and they had lunch in the airfield canteen.

High Waltham was an ex-war-time airfield, built by the Royal Air Force to provide adequate runway facilities for heavy bombers. After the war it had been taken over by the Ministry of Civil Aviation as a stand-by landing ground and as a test zone for jet prototypes, but during latter years it had fallen into disuse—until the recent crisis.

Wade noted the signs of applied security—the new wire fence, eight feet tall, around the perimeter of the field, and the armed sentries patrolling inside the wire. There was only one entrance with a large check post of new brick, where his documents were scrutinized by uniformed officials. At the reception building further examination and interrogation took place, after which he was informed that his wife and son had been assigned to flight thirty-six, scheduled to take off in eighty minutes. Time for a

meal and a drink and a final good-bye.

And all too soon that good-bye was in the here and now, and he was kissing Janet for the last time and squeezing his son's shoulder and exchanging the last unpremeditated and banal words.

"Take good care of yourself, honey. And look after Davey for me."

"We'll be all right, Phil. It's you I'm worried about."

"Not to worry—I'll be okay, and I'll be coming up there to join you very soon."

"How soon, I wonder. . . ."

"Two months, three months. . . ."

Behind them the Tannoy system spoke in metallic tones. "Flight thirty-six. Flight thirty-six. Passengers for Flight thirty-six are asked to join their aircraft now, please. Take-off in four minutes."

People were walking over to the aircraft at the end of the long runway and mounting the stepped gangway. The sky was overcast, a dull uniform gray mottled with crawling raincloud, but the ground was dry. Wade watched silently as his wife and son joined the group of receding passengers, watched them as they climbed the gangway, pausing at the top to turn and wave, and continued to watch after they had disappeared into the comparative darkness of the fuselage.

Minutes ticked by, and then the four engines burst into noisy, vibrant life. Slowly the huge aircraft crept forward, turning into the line of the runway. And then the roar of power throbbed in his ears and flight thirty-six was a diminishing shape moving towards a remote vanishing point, and presently it was a tiny silhouette against the leaden sky.

When the aircraft had disap-

peared from view, Wade returned to his car and drove back to London.

Within a few days he realized, from the nature of the signal messages that passed through his hands, the ominous state of the world. Previously his information had been confined to censored press releases and hearsay, but now he was confronted from minute to minute with statistics and indisputable facts. Unpublishable facts.

The Pacific Ocean, for instance, had become unnavigable, due to powerful currents and enormous whirlpools covering an area of more than a million square miles. The Japanese islands had been utterly devastated by earthquakes and isolated by the seething ocean, and air relief was hopelessly inadequate. Sporadic signals from the Far East gave sparse details of rioting and bloodshed under conditions of famine and chaos. In China, on the eastern seaboard, things were little better, and even Australia had suffered considerably from the overall catastrophe.

The West coast of America, Wade learned, had also suffered to such an extent that in certain areas, Los Angeles and San Francisco included, martial law was the order of the day, and a security barrier had been laid down west of the Rockies to prevent panic-stricken movement of the population towards the east.

The terrestrial sea level had dropped by fourteen feet, and the rate of fall was accelerating swiftly. Already shipping was becoming paralyzed on an international scale. The Suez Canal was rapidly becoming impassable and the majority of the major ports of the world were virtually unapproach-

able. Shipping had become the victim of a creeping paralysis, and the paralysis was killing vital imports and exports. Oil, grain, timber, newsprint, meat, metals, raw materials of all kinds, were rapidly becoming in short supply, and in some cases national stocks were less than two weeks. Despite the normal appearance of the everyday world, it was obvious to Wade that the storm was about to break any moment of any day.

It broke in a small way four days after the departure of Janet and David. The government took over all broadcasting services. The move was in no way ostentatious, taking the form of a behind-the-scenes seizure of power at executive level. An emergency broadcasting committee was formed to supervise and reshape, where necessary, all programs, and, at the same time, the various services were telescoped into a single radio channel and a single television channel, covering the country in a nationwide network.

This was obviously the first step in the establishment of an effective propaganda blanket. Since there were now no alternative channels of radio and television entertainment, the audience was captive at all times. The change was noted briefly in the press as a "short-term measure designed to keep the public fully informed during temporary difficulties arising from the recent series of sporadic earth tremors in the Western Hemisphere."

But the earth tremors were by no means recent; they were continuing and, if anything, increasing in frequency. The seismic center was far away, in mid-Atlantic, where, according to confidential reports, sub-oceanic activity of con-

siderable violence was taking place, though not on the same drastic scale as in the Pacific. Europe and the east coast of America trembled periodically as the shock waves, tearing through the ocean bed, reached the continental land masses in attenuated form, but occasionally, resulting from some major cataclysm beneath the Atlantic, the recurrent trembling would suddenly burst into the terrifying reality of a full-scale earthquake. It was impossible to predict just where the peak force of the blow would strike. Depending, presumably, on the geological structure of the earth's crust in relation to the precise location of the seismic point of origin, the zones of maximum destruction occurred at random—in London one day, Glasgow another, or in Paris or Budapest or Casablanca.

The earthquakes, therefore, provided a reasonable and logical excuse for taking the broadcasting services under governmental control. Very few people realized that the real crisis was something much more insidious.

Wade, understanding all this, found himself wondering what the next step would be. The introduction of rationing, perhaps? It had to come—probably within a few days. Rationing, and then what? Nothing more—just the waiting and waiting while the oceans of the world ran dry and the scientists desperately sought a solution to the problem. A simple view of an unimaginable future, Wade thought. Probably far too simple.

He had overlooked one thing, and it happened two days later. The government, in one comprehensive edict, took over the control of all printing and publishing, and forthwith suppressed every news-

paper and magazine in the land. In place of the wide variety of papers and periodicals that had formerly existed there was now only one daily news-sheet, entitled *National Express*, and one illustrated weekly, named *Comment*, both edited and produced under stringent governmental control.

The reason for this unprecedented and astonishing measure was announced in radio and television news bulletins. "Because of the temporary dislocation of shipping resulting from unexpectedly low spring tides, and the need to use all available freight space for essential commodities, imports of newsprint and bulk paper have been discontinued. During the period of the emergency, in an effort to conserve existing paper stocks, all publication and printing will be suspended with the exception of one four-page national newspaper and a small weekly magazine of illustrated comment. The government hopes to restore normal publishing facilities as soon as it becomes possible to resume paper imports."

Wade thought it unlikely that the public would swallow the "low spring tides" part of the statement, and during the ensuing days he listened carefully to snatches of stray conversations that went on around him in public houses and restaurants, but there was little discernible reaction. A few people grumbled, others casually remarked that they thought things must be pretty bad, some decided it was time for a change of government, and there was an overall tendency to regard the entire thing as political in origin.

He wondered idly about the paper and newsprint situation. True, all imports had ceased, but

stock levels in the country were more than adequate to permit a limited amount of publishing on a ration basis. On the other hand, if you took the long-term view, it was obvious that sooner or later all paper stocks would inevitably become exhausted, even if a widespread salvage and recovery scheme were instituted. Better to have one newspaper for a long time than plenty of papers and magazines for only a few weeks.

The first issue of the new, austere *National Express* was on sale the day after the announcement of the new arrangements. It was priced at one shilling.

During the first week at Consort Building Wade was too immersed in his work to make more than superficial contact with his colleagues. His visitors in the main were clerks from the Cypher Office, or Miss Vance herself, bringing decodes of incoming signals. Occasionally Colonel Brindle came in to check on progress, and one day Major Carey introduced himself, exchanged brisk conversation for about five minutes, then dashed off again on another mysterious mission out of London. Carey's visit was so brief and hurried that Wade afterwards remembered little of the man, retaining in his mind a vague image of a jovial, red-faced giant loosely wrapped in fawn tweeds.

Quite by chance, one lunch time, he left the building with Miss Vance and walked down Kingsway with her towards Aldwych. It was a fine day, one of the few dry days of the year so far, and the sun was shining warmly through a faint haze of striated cloud. Wade bought a copy of the *National Express* and briefly scanned the head-

lines, recognizing one of his own manufacture. *Coastal Silt may be Cultivated*, it announced, and, beneath: *Bold Plan to Boost Grain Crops*. The story, illustrated by a half-tone picture of a not too vast area of sand and silt exposed by the receding coastal waters, was based on a news story that he had dreamed up the day before—a quite impracticable plan to convert the increasing zones of silt and sand around the coast into fertile and arable land to offset impending scarcity of grain imports.

Miss Vance glanced briefly at the headline and said: "Fiction, I take it?"

He nodded. "It comes under the heading of morale boosting."

"Do you really think people are going to believe that kind of thing?"

"It doesn't matter whether they do or not. The point is—it fills the front page with an optimistic story. The man in the street is looking for crisis news, but instead we give him pleasant dreams."

They walked on in silence for a while. Wade glanced sidewise at the girl, seeing her in profile, young and fresh complexioned, with her expression maturely serious.

"It's all part of the technique of control," Wade said presently. "In times of crisis this kind of thing always happens. The truth is distorted, and steps are taken to keep the behavior of the masses within predictable limits. But it's for their own good, and their overall chances of survival are better."

She was looking at him curiously, he noticed.

"Or don't you agree with me?" he added.

"I'm not quite sure what you mean," she said.

"I mean that this kind of mental and physical control of the population—propaganda and rationing—always emerges during a national crisis, like during the war, for instance. But it's a necessary thing for survival."

"Their survival or ours?"

"Well—since you differentiate—theirs. I take it *our* survival is assured."

She nodded.

"Well, the controls are for *their* benefit."

Again the elusive, enigmatic smile that hardly touched her lips.

She said: "You haven't been around long, have you, Mr. Wade?"

"You mean I've got it all wrong?"

"Not exactly. You've got the words right but you haven't read between the lines as yet. There are wheels within wheels."

"Tell me about them," he suggested.

They had stopped outside a restaurant in Aldwych, and it was obvious to Wade that they had reached the end of their walk and talk. "Some other time, Mr. Wade," she said, smiling. "In any case, I'm not at all sure that I'm right, or that I ought to talk about it, right or wrong."

She made to move into the restaurant, but Wade said quickly: "Are you lunching here?"

"Yes."

"Mind if I join you, Miss Vance?"

She hesitated for an instant. "Not at all."

He followed her into the restaurant.

Wade and Miss Vance found a small corner table and sat facing each other across a small vase of narcissi in the subdued light from a hanging chandelier.

The waitresses were busy and the service was slow. He said: "About those wheels . . .?"

She smiled thoughtfully and studied her fingernails. "I see it like this, Mr. Wade. We work in a government department, at a high level of confidence. We see all the facts, but I've seen more than you because I've been around longer. After a time the facts seem to make a pattern. Nothing is actually stated, but the pattern emerges just the same."

"Could be," Wade murmured.

"Take the Arctic camps, for instance. They're being erected just as quickly as is humanly possible. By mid-summer there should be accommodation for perhaps half a million people from the British Isles. The Americans and Canadians are expected to house about four million. In Antarctica there may be further accommodation for about a million. Russia claims three million, but that sounds too optimistic."

"So . . ."

"Those camps are permanent, Mr. Wade. They include factory sites, reactor heating and lighting, and immense plant for recovering water from the ice cap. They're built to last for a long time—perhaps several generations."

"I know that," said Wade. "It shows just how serious the authorities regard this water business."

"It shows more than that, Mr. Wade. Those camps are built for long-term survival in a world where there is no water."

"But we can't be absolutely certain there won't be any water. Engineers are working on pipelines and deep level bores . . ."

Again the enigmatic smile. "Even if they succeeded they couldn't produce more than a

trickle. There are more than two billion people in the world. And my guess is that the main engineering effort is going into the construction of the polar camps. It's no easy job, Mr. Wade."

"I guess you're right," Wade admitted, feeling uncomfortably naïve in the girl's cool, intelligent gaze. "But the survival camps are only one-half of the picture. The real struggle will be fought out here, in England and Europe and all the civilized countries of the world."

She shook her head. "There won't be any struggle."

"Meaning?"

"Before we came in here you were saying something about control of the population. You were right, Mr. Wade. The process of control is just starting. But it's not for *their* benefit—it's for *ours*. It's a ruthless rearguard action to keep the peace while the privileged ones pull out."

"Privileged ones?"

"You and I—the few chosen to survive."

Wade drummed his fingers on the table. "You're implying that about half a million people are going to be evacuated from this country to the Arctic, and the rest will be—abandoned."

"Something like that. There won't be any alternative. Once this emergency really gets under way civilization will revert to the law of the jungle."

"You paint an ugly picture, Miss Vance. But it doesn't add up. If it were certain that only half a million people could survive, then there would have to be a fair and logical basis for selection. Why should I be chosen, anyway? What's so good about me?"

An ironic smile touched her lips. "Expedience, Mr. Wade. Logic

plays little part in it. The survivors must have certain qualities that will facilitate the act of withdrawal. Sir Hubert Piercey evidently considered that you have certain essential qualities for the job you are doing. So you become one of the chosen—and just to make sure your motives stay pure, your family is taken out of danger. Naturally when the crisis breaks you will want to join them. There would be no question of your not wanting to be a survivor under those conditions, would there?"

"I suppose not," he admitted.

Back in the office that afternoon Colonel Brindle came in to see him. "Busy time ahead for you, Wade," he announced without preamble, flinging a sheaf of official documents on to the desk. "Rationing starts at midnight tomorrow. There will be no official announcement until seven o'clock tomorrow evening—that's to avoid panic buying. I want you to prepare suitable material for radio and television announcements, and there will be a special evening edition of the *National Express* giving full details."

Wade stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Rationing of what?"

"Everything. Food, fuel, petrol, textiles—the lot."

"And water?"

"Not as yet—but reservoirs will arrange their own rationing system for the time being. We're recommending they should turn all water supplies off except for one hour in the mornings and a couple of hours in the evenings."

"That won't be popular," Wade said in a subdued voice. "Have the ration books been distributed?"

"They are waiting collection at post offices throughout the country.

There will be a registration system. Later we'll set up official rationing centers."

Wade nodded without enthusiasm.

"You'll find all the information you need in those papers," Brindle said, pointing to the desk. "I'll get the broadcast and press copy, and cyphered duplicates will have to be sent over the I.B.I. network. You might fix that with Patten."

"Okay," said Wade. Brindle hurried out of the office.

Slowly Wade picked up the papers and glanced through them. Foolscap pages bearing single-spaced typing, running on and on for twelve, thirteen, fourteen, pages dealing with allocations, classifications, coupon values, variable points rationing, special categories for babies, expectant mothers, old age pensioners, tobacco restrictions, animal food-stuffs, hospital provisioning—and the legal penalties for infringement of regulations, and further penalties for wasting water, and a host of appendices outlining the more complex and obscure aspects of the situation.

Wade sighed and glanced at his wrist watch. Reading the document in itself was going to be an afternoon's work. Wearily he settled down in his chair and turned to page one.

7. The Survival Syndrome

WITH the advent of rationing came the first signs of civil unrest. Teletyped reports from the big industrial towns brought curt details of demonstrations and political rallies accompanied in some cases by violence and bloodshed.

Troops moved in overnight and armed patrols walked the streets. Then came the strikes—a quick series of industrial stoppages, undoubtedly Communist-inspired, culminating in a major engineering dispute involving twenty-two manufacturing concerns and nearly half a million workers in heavy industry. An incredible thing happened: fifteen of the firms went into voluntary liquidation, and the strike was over—indeed, all strikes were over.

The steel glove of military control began to tighten its grip. Rationing in itself was bad enough, but a new and even more terrifying threat was slowly revealed—the spectre of mass unemployment. The liquidation of the engineering firms, effective though it had been as a strike-breaking move, had, in fact, been occasioned through necessity. It started with the shipyards and associated industries; as the sea level dropped by thirty feet, creeping to forty and fifty and beyond, it became only too evident that the seas and oceans were no longer available for navigation. Ships were already obsolete, and there was no point whatever in continuing to make them.

The paralysis spread to other industries. The critical shortage of fuel oil and petrol, and the closing of export markets coupled with the complete cessation of imports, spread like leprosy throughout the factories of the country. The unemployed total grew steadily—two million, three million—then began to snowball. Ten million, twelve million, fifteen million.... Rationing became meaningless. There was no work and consequently no money to buy even the rations that were available.

It happened quickly, in the

course of three weeks, and so quickly that Wade found himself scarcely able to comprehend the enormity of what was taking place. For one thing he was out of it all, an objective observer building up an incredible picture from terse, impersonal signal messages, cushioned by privilege against the horrific reality of the unprivileged masses. He read the facts and computed the statistics, and continued to live his own life; as a government executive he could still use his car, drawing a restricted but adequate ration of petrol. Driving along the deserted roads of London got to be a harassing (and, indeed, embarrassing) ordeal, and it wasn't long before he ran into trouble. It started in a small way, with jeers from gangs of unemployed men loitering in the streets. Then came stones. One morning, driving from his home into the center of London a brick crashed through his windscreen. He drove on defiantly past the angry gesticulating mob, forcing his mind to remain calm and dispassionate. You couldn't blame them, after all. The brick was merely a gesture of the universal resentment against the government, against the trend of events in general. It was an act of defiance against privileged officialdom. It was the subversive act of the desperate—the beginning, perhaps, of incipient chaotic anarchy.

Wade had underestimated the temper of the people. Three days later, driving along Bayswater Road, with not another car in sight, he found himself confronted by a group of some thirty men, strung out across the road. He debated for a moment, uncertain as to whether he ought to stop or crash right through them. He

braked suddenly, and they closed in on him.

A thin faced, wild-eyed man opened the offside door and said fiercely: "Government man—we'll show you." Wade slid along the seat away from him. The other door opened and a muscular arm hooked him round the neck. In an instant he was spreadeagled in the road and they were on him in a mass, punching and kicking and dragging him towards a side street. He caught a brief agonized glimpse of the car turned on its side and the air was full of the sound of splintering glass and the harsh crash of metal on metal. A moment later the concussion of an explosion roared in his ears, and later, before he lost consciousness, he saw the ugly, battered shape of his car spurting flames and belching smoke.

That was Wade's first experience of mob violence, but not his last. He learned in hospital that he had been rescued by a military patrol, and that two men had been shot dead during the act of rescue. The detective who interviewed him while he was still in bed wrapped in bandages assured him that, but for the intervention of the troops, he would certainly have been murdered. Such was the mood of the people.

Wade spent ten days in the hospital recovering from general shock. Physically the damage was superficial, apart from an ugly laceration across his scalp. They had shaved off his hair, of course, and his enforced baldness both worried and amused him at the same time. His shaven head was adorned by a large area of white lint and plaster, like an Easter hat.

Patten came to see him in hospital, and also Brindle. They

brought cigarettes and, secretively, a bottle of whiskey and a bottle of brandy. Wade recognized that the gifts were indeed a luxury, for spirits, and even beer, were in short supply, and prices had rocketed to a fantastic level. The whiskey, for instance, had cost more than seven pounds for the bottle, and the brandy nearer ten.

He had one other visitor, welcome and at the same time, because of his shaven head, unwelcome, and that was Miss Vance. She brought him a packet of cigarettes (fifteen shillings for twenty) and smiled at his grotesque appearance. She sat on a chair beside his bed and eyed him mischievously.

"You look cute," she observed.

"So do you," Wade countered.

"I'm glad it wasn't anything more serious, Mr. Wade. Things are getting bad."

Wade computed that he had already been in hospital five days. "What's happening?" he asked. "Outside, I mean."

"Oh—a kind of unofficial insurrection. It's to be expected, I suppose. What with unemployment and rationing and the cost of living going up and up. . . ."

"Is anything being done?"

"Well, yes—in a way. The government are issuing relief money on a large scale. They must be working overtime printing banknotes. The trouble is that the money loses its value overnight. You'd hardly recognize some of London's streets—they've got mobile field kitchens installed, with people queuing for miles, waiting for free meals. But there's a great deal of looting going on. Shops have emptied their windows, and troops are guarding the main shopping centers — particularly food shops."



Like savage animals they attacked Philip.

"And the water situation . . . ?"

She smiled grimly. "You haven't heard, of course. The oceans are draining away faster and faster. Professor Spendle has estimated that the Atlantic will be dry inside eight weeks, and the Pacific in about three months."

"There haven't been many earthquakes recently."

"Nothing phenomenal—just minor tremors. I think, perhaps, that the worst damage has been done."

Wade looked at her for a long time without speaking, trying to build up in his mind a picture of the overall situation. You had to accept the fact that a crisis of this type must inevitably produce a profound and violent reaction among the mass of the population. This was more than famine, and more than drought: it was, in a sense, a virulent plague, spreading swiftly throughout the world, depriving men of all they possessed, and taking away security. Naturally they would revert to a more fundamental level of behavior. The niceties of civilized social conduct must go by the board. The basic survival drive must dominate every thought and act. Only rigid and uncompromising control by authority could maintain law and order, and then only for a limited period.

"Is anything being done on a scientific level?" he asked.

"You mean pipelines and bores?"

He nodded.

"Yes—I believe something is being done in a small way. But more important things are taking place on the psychological plane. Radio, television and the press. You're missing all the fun, Mr. Wade."

"Such as?"

"Song plugging, for one thing. The top hit number right now is a thing called 'Shoulder to Shoulder'

—all about how we are all brothers and sisters in arms, facing whatever might come with cheerfulness and optimism. You can hear it twenty times a day or more. In fact you can't avoid it."

"And how is it all going to end?" Wade asked.

She shook her head doubtfully. "A gradual breaking down of civilization, of lawful conduct. As I see it everything depends on the amount of charity the government can dispense."

"And what about us?"

"I don't know, Mr. Wade. There is talk of establishing a kind of government residential zone between Kingsway and Whitehall, sealed off with barbed wire and machine guns. It may come to that yet."

He took her hand and squeezed it gently. "Thanks, Miss Vance," he said. "You've cheered me up no end. The future looks very rosy indeed."

She acknowledged his irony with a thin smile, and returned the pressure on her hand. Something electric seemed to surge momentarily through his veins.

She said: "People I know pretty well call me Susan, or even Sue."

Wade nodded. "I'll make a note of it."

"What do your friends call you?" she asked.

"All sorts of things. Sometimes they call me Philip, or even Phil."

"I'll make a note of it, too," she murmured.

She left soon after, and Wade spent the next hour pondering the dark future, and occasionally thinking of Susan Vance, and the exhilarating sense of her presence, and in particular the excitement of the physical contact when he had touched her hand. Not once

in that time did the thought of Janet pass through his mind.

When Wade was discharged from hospital and returned to his home, he found that the house had been ransacked. Everything of value, however trivial, had been stolen. The rear windows had been smashed and the greater part of the furniture was missing. They had taken his clothes, his books, his portable typewriter, and worst of all, they had taken the small stockpile of cigarettes and whiskey that he had been carefully building up.

He inspected the desolate rooms, stripped of carpets and lino, and the bedrooms, stripped of beds and bedding, and cursed humanity as a whole. He attempted to phone the police, but found that the microphone unit had even been stolen from the handset.

From a callbox he notified the police, and presently they came round and investigated, but their manner was indifferent and lethargic. This sort of thing was going on all the time, the sergeant pointed out. Property no longer had any value. Crime had become a natural function of society. The world consisted of have-nots for the most part, and they took what they wanted from the haves. There was little the police could do about it. But they made notes and compiled an inventory of the stolen items, then said good morning and departed.

Wade returned to his office in the Consort Building. He travelled in a crowded underground train. No buses were running, because of the fuel shortage, and the only remaining modes of transportation were the electric train services and a number of horse-drawn taxis.

Patten was in his office when he arrived—a frantic and bewildered Patten, partially engulfed in a small mountain of documents.

Patten breathed a huge sigh of relief when he saw Wade. He stretched out his arms and smiled broadly. "Wade," he said happily, "you're the nicest thing I've seen in days." He stood up and waved one arm in a gesture of renunciation over the desk. "It's all yours, Wade. I've had more than my fill."

As an afterthought he added: "Are you well?"

"Well enough," Wade conceded.

He settled down to work with no great enthusiasm. The signals from other I.B.I. centers overseas were depressing in the extreme. In Italy there had been wide-scale riots and the troops had killed more than twenty thousand people. China was a land of the dead, and the dead lay everywhere in the streets of the towns and in the open country. Japan had virtually ceased to exist. Martial law was the order of the day in Australia and New Zealand. Russia had embarked upon a program of eugenic control of population, selecting those most suited for survival on a dialectical and ideological basis, and exterminating those who failed to reach the required standard. The United States of America was a land divided among itself, with individual states demanding and acquiring autonomy, and dealing with their own particular problems as they severally saw fit. But everywhere death was a prominent factor; indeed, surveying the statistics as a whole, death had become a scientific and legitimate technique in the fight for survival. Death applied technically, perhaps politically, sometimes impartially, but always according to the rules.

Slowly Wade began to build up a picture of the world situation. During the ten days he had been in hospital there had been dramatic developments in the outside world. Sea level had fallen so rapidly that part of the bed of the Atlantic Ocean was already exposed, for the first time since the world began, to the light of day. Strange fish had been found in the oceanic mud and ooze—fish that had made headlines in the *National Express*—and (this was the major news story of the past week) the remains of the *Titanic* had been uncovered by the receding ocean. Rain had stopped abruptly, all over the world, it seemed. Although it was still early April, the sun had been shining warmly for more than a week from an unclouded sky, and shining with an unaccustomed intensity. The ground, in fields and allotments and gardens, was already cracking from dryness, and seedling plants were dying in their billions. Water was still unrationed, in the sense that no coupon system had yet been introduced, but the water boards and reservoir authorities were exercising stringent control. The early liberal allowance of three hours' water supply per day had been cut to two, and then to one, and a signal on Wade's desk announced a further cut to take effect at midnight: as from tomorrow water would only be available for thirty minutes each morning.

Food stocks, according to documentary evidence, were low. Worse still, the meteorological office predicted a hot dry summer with no rainfall at all, and it looked as if there would be no harvest worth mentioning. A secret international conference had taken place to ascertain the feasibility of interna-

tional exchange of surplus foods during the early phase of the crisis, but no decision had been reached, partly because no country could envisage the possibility of having any surplus food stocks at all, and partly because exporting and importing would of necessity have to be effected by air, and the trickle of provisions so obtained would not materially alter the situation in any one continent.

During the afternoon Colonel Brindle came into his office and made himself comfortable in a steel and plastic chair. He offered Wade a cigar, and Wade accepted the luxury, conscious of the fact that cigarettes and cigars were virtually extinct. Brindle's pale blue eyes looked rather dreamy, and his long jaw seemed sadder than ever.

He said: "Glad to see you fit again, Wade. The department needs your imaginative touch. Patten did his best but he knows his limitations, and so do we."

Wade said nothing—just moved his lips into a sour shape.

Brindle drew heavily on his cigar. He said: "For ten days you've been out of touch with events. You've probably noticed changes."

"Just a few," Wade conceded.

"You were unlucky. The mob who attacked you and destroyed your car are one of the toughest in London right now. The police have already attributed more than thirty murders to them. All the same, running a car is getting to be a risky business. It pays to keep to the major roads where the patrols are at hand."

"I was on a major road at the time."

"I know, Wade—but patrols

have been quadrupled since then."

An interval of silence while they drew on their cigars. Blue gray smoke ascended lazily towards the white ceiling.

"I understand your home was burgled," Brindle said presently.

"I'm afraid so."

"Lose much?"

"Pretty well everything. In particular about two thousand cigarettes and ten bottles of Scotch."

Brindle waved one hand nonchalantly. "You're better without them, but if you really need the stuff I can fix it."

"Well, thanks, Colonel. I guess I don't really need it, but I hate to be without it. But you didn't come here to talk about my morbid appetites."

Brindle grinned briefly. "No, I didn't. As a matter of fact I came to discuss certain immediate plans. The country is in an ugly mood. People don't understand clearly what is happening, but they are aware of the rationing and the restrictions, and they tend to be hostile towards government officials, as you ought to know."

Wade nodded.

"You're not the only one to suffer assault, Wade. Kennedy of the Statistical Department was beaten up three days ago. Brace from Accounts was slashed not twenty yards from his home. Even worse, Miss Graham from the Computing Division was attacked and raped by four thugs the day before yesterday. I had a call from the hospital about two hours ago. She's dead."

All Wade could say was: "I'm sorry." He didn't know the girl, but the horror reverberated in his mind for several minutes.

"In view of all this, the department has decided to take certain

steps to safeguard members of the staff. We have requisitioned the Waldorf Hotel, just round the corner. It is to be residential quarters for the staff, where they will be within three minute's walk of Consort building. Naturally every facility will be available. We have taken steps to insure that our people will be as comfortable as possible under the prevailing conditions."

Wade thought of his own derelict home and found himself very much in favor of the scheme. He said so.

"Good," Brindle commented. "You have no choice, anyway. This is an order, with no appeal. It is the first step towards the establishment of a barricaded governmental zone extending towards Charing Cross and beyond—to Whitehall. We're taking over other hotels too. The area is to be evacuated, apart from government staff, and we plan to build a helicopter port just off the Strand. We anticipate that road transport will become steadily more hazardous."

"I get the impression," Wade said, "that we seem to be preparing for some kind of siege—with a helicopter escape route available should the need arise."

Brindle nodded slowly. "It may come to that. We believe that we have everything under control—up to a point. But things are moving so quickly, and it is impossible to determine exactly how the mass of the population will react to further hardships. We are simply taking the obvious precautions."

"When do we move into the Waldorf?" Wade asked.

"Today, if you are ready. At all events, the sooner the better."

"I'm ready now," said Wade.

Brindle nodded appreciatively. "Sensible man. I'll get the Person-

nel Department to assign you to a room. Naturally, things may be a bit chaotic for a day or two, but we shall soon settle in."

Brindle stood up and walked towards the door. "I'll give you a buzz later. And incidentally, I'll fix you up with a crate of Scotch and a crate of gin."

"I'm not sure that I can afford it," Wade said.

"It's on the house," Brindle remarked, waving a hand generously. "Money isn't worth the paper it's printed on anymore."

Until his hair had grown to a respectable length, Wade led a solitary life, avoiding his colleagues as much as possible both on and off duty. He criticized himself for his vanity, but had to admit that there was nothing he could do about it. The fact was that he was sensitive about his appearance, and he recognized that his urge to withdraw from contact with others was in the nature of a compulsion.

It was six weeks before all trace of baldness had been eradicated, and the new growth of hair pleased him.

During that time Wade had changed in several ways. For one thing he had learned the art of self-control to such an extent that smoking and drinking had ceased to be habitual. The addiction was destroyed, and he smoked and drank occasionally, by design, as an act of defiance. And it was in the same spirit of inverted stubbornness that he made up his mind to go out and chance the city again.

Caution asserted itself. The road was clear of louts, but he was not prepared to take chances. Clenching his fists he advanced warily towards the road leading towards the tube station. The road was quiet enough, but four or five

blocks down there was a throng of people grouped at a corner—both men and women. He decided to play safe, and crossed over the road, taking a side street to a parallel road that would lead towards Maida Vale tube station.

He found himself approaching a church, and the air trembled with the remote sound of voices singing a hymn. He hesitated at the porch, then went in.

The church was filled to capacity, and people were standing in overflow at the rear near to the font. He joined them, remaining silent as the hymn continued, until the voices ceased and the organ rumbled into silence.

A voice came from across the congregation, a clear resonant voice, speaking with a veiled savagery. He missed the first few sentences, and his attention focused abruptly on a reference to hydrogen bombs.

"It must have been apparent to all men of Christian reason that in these hydrogen weapons was the nucleus of the ultimate evil," pronounced the minister. "They were designed for one specific purpose—destruction. They were tested to make sure that their capacity to destroy could not be bettered. The tests, they told us, were innocent and harmless. There could be no danger either to the present generation of humanity or to future generations.

"But God in his wisdom decided to challenge the lies told in the name of science. He decided to demonstrate once and for all the fallacy of what is known as scientific logic. He showed us the true power of the elemental forces with which scientists were experimenting—the power to destroy the world.

"We are seeing the world destroyed, slowly and inevitably, at the whim of the scientists and politicians. It is the supreme lesson which God in his mercy has seen fit to teach us. The ultimate power, the power that energizes the living universe, does not stem from the laboratory or the atomic reactor or the nuclear weapon proving zone; it comes from the Divine Spirit that animates mankind and the world we live in.

"The lesson is being taught, and it is for us to learn the lesson. The forces of material science have been discredited for all time, and we must turn to God for our salvation. . . ."

Wade left the church and made his way to the underground. No comment, he said to himself. No comment at all. The scientists are certainly in an indefensible position. It all started with an H-bomb. Operation Nutcracker, and everything that came after. You can't blame the clergy for seeking a technological scapegoat—the preachers and the scientists have been at each other's throats for more than a century. But why drag God into it? God in his wisdom and God in his mercy. This is man's doing, the whole lousy business, and man has to face up to it, honorably or dishonorably, but at least with dignity. The human race must necessarily be decimated, that is inevitable, and it is something that God in all his wisdom cannot prevent. Or in all his mercy.

And when the final hours come, Wade thought, when the dead are rotting in the sun-baked streets and the only water is that locked in the inanimate protoplasm, will the men of God still be using science as a whipping boy and urging

us to learn the supreme lesson? What we are going to need, all of us, is not a lesson in religion or abstract ethics, but water pure and simple—H₂O—a simple combination of hydrogen and oxygen in specific relationship. And though we may pray to God, or whatever we believe in, it is the scientists who will eventually provide the solution. Those who have the power to destroy also have the power to create.

What the hell! he exclaimed mentally. I'm getting morbid in my old age, and a damned sight too metaphysical.

He was glad when he had returned to Kingsway.

8. The Three Horsemen

CAME June, and the hot weather persisted, and the sky over Britain remained an intense, unclouded blue. The Atlantic and Pacific oceans became mud flats, rapidly drying out and cracking into vast jig-saw patterns, with their own fantastic vegetation of dying undersea flora. Billions of fish were destroyed as the waters receded, and among them were new sub-oceanic species that had never before been seen by man. In the oceans there were lakes of salt water left in declivities and hollows, but slowly they were giving up their water to the heat of the sun. The rivers of Britain had become rivulets trickling over baked river beds. The Thames was a shallow stream of sluggish water, and you could walk across it well into the estuary.

Full water rationing came into effect early in the month. All main supplies were cut off at the res-

ervoirs, and bowser trucks delivered bulk allocations to improvised rationing centers in key districts. The basic ration was two gallons per person per day, but there was a special allowance for such industries as were still functioning. There were also stringent cuts in food rations. A new synthetic food consisting of a derivative of polythene foam plastic had been introduced: it was in effect a substitute for bread, and it provided bulk plus vitamins and glucose (and bromides, the cynics suggested).

Civil unrest and crime increased. There was an upsurge of racketeering and violence and murder, culminating in gang warfare in half a dozen of the principal cities of the British Isles. In America things were even worse, and the greater part of Europe was an anarchy rigorously and ruthlessly controlled by martial law. The English Channel was virtually dry, and there were fears that desperate Europeans would attempt to cross it in an effort to migrate north towards the Arctic ice.

The *National Express*, however, ignored the tragedy that was reported with every teletype message, and concentrated on what could only be described as the gimmicks of the situation. Long, illustrated features on the Messitter pipeline network; excited articles on the discovery of new water wells in rural areas; learned observations on scientific findings in the dry ocean beds; a big story proving that there never had been an Atlantis—and even religious articles interpreting the crisis in terms of character determination, which, Wade thought, was the cruellest cut of all.

He wrote many letters to Janet and David, and saw a great deal

of Susan Vance. At first she had been vaguely hostile, because, she explained, for the six weeks following his stay in hospital he had seized every opportunity of avoiding her.

"It was deliberate," Wade explained. "I didn't like the look of my shaven head."

"I don't remember raising objections," Susan said.

"Nevertheless, I was being considerate in not inflicting my curious appearance on others."

"Am I others?" she asked, smiling.

"A very special kind of other, I guess."

"I'll forgive you," she said.

They were talking together over lunch in the Waldorf, where the ballroom had been converted into a restaurant for personnel from Consort Building. The food was austere enough, and had been deteriorating over the weeks, but it was still a banquet by external standards, and because of that Wade was never able to stifle a sense of guilt as he ate and drank. On this particular day the main dish was a composite of a kind of seasoned omelet (hens were still laying eggs, apparently, and feeding on stocks of dried corn stored from pre-crisis days) and reconstituted dehydrated potatoes. There were no green vegetables, for the agricultural land was arid and rapidly becoming barren, but spaghetti made an acceptable, if tasteless, substitute.

"It would be nice," Susan said, "to sample fish once in a while."

"You are talking of an extinct species," Wade commented.

"Funny when you think of it," she remarked. "All life came from the sea, according to the theory of evolution. And now the fishes

are gone, perhaps for ever. . . ."

"I suppose some of them will survive in the sub-oceanic cavities—in eternal darkness. They'll probably evolve into something quite different."

"In about ten million years. They may even inherit the earth."

"Not while there's ice at the poles."

Susan hesitated, then said: "I don't care to think about it, somehow. These last few weeks I've stopped looking into the future. I just take the present as it comes."

"So long as it keeps coming there's nothing to worry about," Wade remarked sardonically.

"Sometimes I wonder whether the most sensible thing to do isn't to get drunk, day and night, until the end."

"What end? I thought we were one of the survival group."

"We are in theory, Phil—but incredible things are happening, and none of us can predict the course of events."

Wade shrugged. "Well, if you want to get drunk, I've got the wherewithalls. We can get drunk together."

She raised her eyebrows questioningly.

"I have a private stock," he explained. "The result of a little internal wire-pulling. Candidly, I hardly touch it these days, but if you'd care to join me in a private cocktail party for two . . ."

She eyed him intently, in a way that made him feel slightly uncomfortable, but in a moment she smiled. "I think it's a wonderful idea, Phil."

"Tonight, perhaps?"

She nodded briskly. "Tonight."

And in such a way did Susan Vance become an integral part of Wade's complex emotional life.

Two days later there was a tremendous earthquake—the most devastating to date. The shock wave created havoc throughout the southeastern area of England, tearing gigantic rifts in the ground, and shattering buildings on a wide scale in a score of major towns and cities. Oxford Street in London resembled the aftermath of an air raid, and the line of devastation spread well into the East End, destroying offices and shops and houses to Dagenham and beyond. The Waldorf Hotel danced in a crazy infernal jig for nearly half an hour, but it remained intact, apart from splintered windows. Immediately facing, a segment of Bush House crumbled, and an outside wall collapsed revealing stacked offices gaping hollowly above Aldwych.

Although the earthquake in itself was catastrophe enough, the after-effects were even worse. Fractures in the rock strata beneath London wrought havoc with underground structures—the tube railway system, the drains, water mains, gas pipes, electricity and telephone conduits. Communications were paralyzed, and gas and electrical services were completely disrupted over a wide area. The signals that came into Wade's office made depressing, and sometimes horrific reading. Fires that had broken out had proved to be almost uncontrollable due to the critical shortage of water, and one particularly severe fire in the Poplar district had only been kept in check by dynamiting a large residential zone.

Although Wade did not realize it at the time, this was the beginning of the end. For one thing the weather was extremely hot, with temperatures rising above ninety

Fahrenheit every day, and rain was a curious phenomenon of days long dead. Water had a rarity value, and one of the big problems that had arisen during recent weeks was that of sanitation: there was only an infinitesimal quantity of water available for the purpose of sanitary drainage. The sewage farms were derelict, and lavatory cisterns had become completely inoperative. Beneath every town and city was a network of pipes congested with drying sewage, and the earthquake burst them asunder.

Nothing happened for one week—two weeks—and then the first cases were reported over the communications network. Typhoid—five, seventeen, twenty-six, forty-nine, eighty-two, and on and on into the hundreds and thousands. And then, as the typhoid epidemic consolidated its grip on the population of southeast England, came the first hint of something even more terrifying. It was cholera.

The plague spread rapidly from its point of origin in Stepney, and the figures mounted rapidly. The hospitals, already overloaded with typhoid cases, were unable to cope with the new epidemic. Schools and church halls were taken over as emergency wards, and, as the death roll mounted, special furnaces were built to incinerate the victims of the plague.

To prevent the spread of infection the government introduced special measures to stop the migration of population from the affected Home Counties. All rail services were suspended, and road blocks, manned by troops, were erected on all roads to the north. And then, when armed gangs attempted to break through the barriers in a violent bid to escape

from plague-ridden London, martial law was imposed. The first firing squads went into action.

Wade, along with the rest of the staff at Consort Building, underwent daily medical examinations and received countless hypodermic injections. Kingsway was sealed off with a stout barbed wire fence patrolled by the military. The underground railway system came to a halt, as did all traffic. The city settled down to a quiet and bitter paralysis.

From incoming reports he learned that London was by no means unique. Cholera had, of course, already wrought havoc in the Far East, and was even now springing up in most of the countries of Europe, and in Africa and South America. The United States and Canada, curiously enough, were free from plague so far, but there had been severe epidemics of typhoid. Inevitably all air transit between the continents of the world had come to a stop: it was as if all the authorities of the world had recognized that the threat of virulent disease was, for the moment, more important than the danger of thirst and starvation.

For Wade, confined to the Consort Building during the day and the Waldorf Hotel at night, life seemed to have little point. He was aware of a subtle impression of having been buried alive; the Kingsway zone was a tiny fertile oasis in a vast poisonous area of incipient death. The statistics, as they came from the Cypher Office, only served to increase his sense of desolation. Thirty thousand had died from cholera the previous day, and nearly two thousand from typhoid. Despite the abolition of all road and rail traffic the plague had spread northwards, and the

first cases of cholera were being reported in Liverpool and Manchester, and as far away as Carlisle.

His only consolation, if such it was, lay in his maturing relationship with Susan Vance. Maturing because there was, between them, a certain indefinable feeling of calculated intimacy—or perhaps intimacy was not exactly the right word. It was superficially a platonic affair. No kisses, no embraces and not even a word of endearment. But in spite of the veneer of apparent disinterest Wade was conscious of a distinct mutual magnetism. He and Susan seemed to gravitate naturally towards each other; they possessed a distinct psychological affinity that was satisfying in itself, and as June gave way to July they found themselves spending most evenings in each other's company.

Inevitably, of course, the relationship had to spread to the emotional plane, and in this respect he felt that Susan herself was the principal instigator. The drinks had been holding out well, but inexorably the bottles became empty one by one, and towards the end of the first week in July the alcoholic jaunt came to its end. In the world outside the water ration had been cut to six pints per day, and Wade recognized the utter finality of the last glass of whiskey as he and Susan sipped it.

"After this," she said quietly, "there will be no reason for me to come here any more." She was sitting on a chair by the window, looking at him obliquely and enigmatically.

"I guess not," Wade agreed.

"You know, Phil, you're a funny character. I never knew a man to see so much of a girl without making a pass at her."

"Do men still make passes in this topsy-turvy world?"

She smiled grimly. "More than ever, and more insistently. You've seen the crime statistics."

"I wasn't thinking in terms of criminal assault," Wade remarked. "Taking a broad view of human relationships I should have thought that any kind of romantic interest between a man and a woman implied a future of some kind."

"Meaning . . ."

"Well—surely the future is important to lovers? And since there doesn't seem to be any future worth considering . . ."

Susan finished her drink—the final drink—then stood up and placed her glass deliberately on the table. She came over to him, standing quite close, yet in some way remote. There was an archness in her eyes that excited him vaguely.

"Why don't you stop talking, Phil. Words are always a barrier in any language."

He kissed her briefly and she responded in the same transient manner. "Neat," she murmured, "but it would hardly disturb the earth in its orbit. Try harder."

He tried harder, and discovered a curious thing—that time came to a halt, and in that interval of silent eternity the earth seemed to stop in its orbit. He allowed himself to dissolve, to become an abstract function of the present moment, the instantaneous present with no past and no future. And Susan Vance, in all her youth and loveliness, became the only real thing in a world of twisted and distorted shadows.

Later, in the quiet, dark intimacy of the evening, he said softly: "I love you, Sue."

"You don't have to, Phil," she replied. "We're being logical, that's



all. You and me, and the pressure of world events. We're not the only ones."

"I guess not."

"And if it hadn't been you, it would have been someone else—perhaps Patten. . . ."

"Isn't that being—just a little too logical?"

She laughed, and a certain quality of harshness in her voice disconcerted him. "Don't try to read between the lines, Phil. There's nothing written there."

"I don't understand."

"It's simple enough. You're trying to look at us in a spiritual way, as if we were the innocent victims of some irresistible romantic urge. It's not like that at all, Phil, and you know it. I'm a methodical scheming character, just like you. You don't need to be spiritual with me—just honest, that's all."

"I'm being honest," said Wade

—and, indeed, he meant it. He felt a genuine affection for her.

Wade's infatuation with Susan Vance was a positive thing that obsessed his thoughts day and night, and it was aggravated considerably by her own refusal to accept the situation in any responsible way. They became lovers, amid the typhoid and the cholera and the riots and the peremptory executions of martial law, and yet she never quite gave herself to him —only her body, but nothing of her soul. Even in the act of making love it seemed to him that she was observing from some remote point, dispassionately and almost sardonically. Puzzled and confused, he pursued his own intense emotions with sincere single-mindedness, devoting himself to the girl, and rejecting the jagged memories of Janet that periodically threatened the tranquility of his mind.



Meanwhile, the outside world became a shambles, maintained in rigorous shape by the ruthless application of military law. Cholera was spreading all over the country—all over Europe. Water stocks reached a new low, sustained only by microscopic injections from the Messiter pipelines, stretching in fine filaments from the solid land surfaces of the British Isles across the dry ocean bed to the residual pools and lakes, and northwards towards the polar ice. But even the pipelines proved to be vulnerable: every day reports arrived in the Cypher Office of attempts to sever them and steal the water being pumped to the central reservoirs. In fact, the Messiter pipelines were never fully operational. Black market gangs were continually engaged in sabotage—cutting the lines and stockpiling water for resale at fabulous prices. As the salt

water pools in the Atlantic and the North Sea dried out, so the pipelines became fewer in number, and as July drew to a close, the only effective water supply was that channelled from the north. It was merely a drop in the ocean and was, for the most part, reserved for the use of the armed forces.

Soon, the water ration was cut to three pints per day, and, in due course, two pints. But one could still buy off-ration water on the Black Market at ten shillings a pint. Equally acute was the shortage of food. During the hot rainless summer the green fields of England became brown and lifeless. Cattle were slaughtered from necessity—there were no longer any grazing pastures to sustain them. Wheat stocks were low: no imports were being received from Canada or the U.S.A. Bread was rapidly becoming a luxury.

Despite the absolute embargo on travel, Wade observed from incoming reports that people were moving *en masse* from one part of the country to another, particularly towards the north, into Scotland, and beyond. Aerial photographs revealed that small groups of people were attempting to cross the dry ocean bed, north of the Hebrides, pioneering a new route towards the Arctic ice. Wade wondered idly what their ultimate fate would be—probably death from thirst and starvation, or cholera, in the fantastic environment of desiccated sub-oceanic mud and dehydrated undersea flora and fauna. Or, if they ever reached the built-up Arctic zones, death from machine gun bullets for attempted illegal entry into the haven of security.

The emigration towards the north was to some extent matched by immigration from the south. Across the cracked black trough that was the English Channel came the refugees from the Continent, carrying their few pathetic belongings on their backs, or wheeling their possessions in battered perambulators. They got no further than the barbed wire spanning the south coast of Britain. Machine gun nests eliminated them with impartial ruthlessness.

Wade was able to witness this for himself one afternoon during a brief return of Major Carey to his Kingsway base. South of Aldwych a number of buildings had been demolished to make room for a level expanse of concrete that was, in effect, a heliport—a practical landing and take-off zone for helicopters and vertical-ascent aircraft. Carey had apparently returned from the north of England in a helicopter, and, indeed, he was still wearing a flying helmet when

he strode into Wade's office. Carey's complexion seemed more florid than ever, and he still wore the same sporty fawn tweeds: he looked as if he had just returned from the Grand National after a major win.

"How're things, Wade?" Carey asked.

Wade shrugged. "A steady decline, I should say—rather like a count-down."

"Count-down to zero? Could be. The sixty-four-dollar question is—when is zero? How soon?"

"A month—two months."

Carey's moustache quivered interrogatively. "Zero in what respect—or doesn't it matter?"

"It doesn't matter. Zero all round. Water stocks can't be more than three weeks, and once they're gone—well, it's the end. Absolute zero."

Carey blew his nose loudly.

"What I'm wondering," Wade said, "is—have the Cabinet any plans for dealing with the final crisis when it arises in the next few weeks? What's to happen to us, and when?"

Carey smiled—a rather twisted smile. "The Cabinet is no longer in this country, so any decisions will probably be quite dispassionate and arbitrary. I believe the official government address is somewhere in Zone D in the Arctic."

"I'm not surprised."

"Not everything goes over the I.B.I. network, Wade. Other countries are playing cagey, too. But don't worry. We shall be looked after—most of us, anyway."

"Most?"

"Wade," Carey said seriously, "it is physically impossible to evacuate every government employee in the time available. The indispen-

sable departments are already in the Arctic. The airlift is going on all the time. But you have to realize that people like us, concerned with information and propaganda, are essentially the rearguard. It is in the public interest that we should remain on duty until the last possible moment."

Wade was vaguely alarmed. "You mean—that some of us may be left behind when the time comes?"

Carey waved a nonchalant hand. "It's on the cards—but not to worry. Things are never so bad as they seem."

"Mmm," said Wade thoughtfully. "I sometimes wonder if things aren't worse than we imagine."

Carey lit up a cigarette—luxury indeed—without offering one to Wade. "Things," he said decisively, "are strictly under control. Not in the nicest way, perhaps—but under control. You have to remember that some seventy per cent of the population of this planet is going to die anyway—in the very near future. That changes the moral climate of society. Death is, in a sense, a public service. Even nature realizes that. Have you ever thought, Wade, that when mass death is desirable, nature often takes a hand in the proceedings."

"You mean—such things as typhoid and cholera?"

"Exactly."

"I wouldn't blame nature, Major. After all, nature didn't manufacture the H-bomb that split the bed of the Pacific Ocean."

Carey laughed and puffed smoke rings. "Nature manufactured *homo sapiens*, and *homo sapiens* manufactured the H-bomb and destroyed the world. The chain of responsibility is direct enough."

"You're talking in the abstract.

But, in fact, every step the government takes is directed towards survival of mankind as a whole."

"Sure, sure," said Carey, grinning. "Tell you what, Wade—why don't you come with me on a helicopter trip over the south coast. That way you can see just how the survival program is working out."

Wade protested at first, but in the end he agreed, partly because Carey was most persuasive in his manner, and partly because he realized that this was in effect his first opportunity to see for himself the physical effects of the water recession. Hitherto his information had been derived from encoded I.B.I. signals, and from official photographs.

He ate a frugal lunch with Major Carey in the Waldorf, but at least it was a lunch, which, he thought, was considerably more than was available to the average citizen outside the governmental barrier.

After lunch he accompanied Major Carey to the new heliport south of Aldwych. Carey climbed into the pilot's seat, and Wade sat alongside him. The take-off was smooth and competent, and presently the Thames lay beneath them, dehydrated into a meandering strip of black clay, with a wisp of stagnant water reflecting the intense blue of the sky like a luminous ribbon.

From the air, London looked normal enough, but here and there Wade could detect the outward symptoms of earthquake damage; across Brixton, for instance, a distinct crevice was visible, cutting obliquely across several blocks of houses, and in certain areas many buildings were empty shells possessing a gutted appearance that reminded him of the last war. The

roads were curiously deserted, and the railway tracks were desolate.

Beyond the built-up area, as they flew swiftly towards Sussex and the coast, the open ground formed a dull brown wasteland reaching to the horizon on all sides. It was as if, Wade thought, an army of flamethrowers had passed through, pursuing a scorched earth policy. The only splashes of green came from the deeply rooted trees—those still able to suck the attenuated moisture from the subsoil and so sustain a mantle of foliage. Dried out lakes and ponds passed beneath the aircraft—a random succession of dark shallow craters. If the color were different it might have been a moonscape—there was the same pervading atmosphere of a stark monochrome wilderness.

Wade failed to recognize the coast when they reached it for the simple reason there was no longer any coast to see. The ground changed color. A narrow strip of dry sand, yellow, almost white in the sun glare, and then the darker tones of the bed of the English Channel, flung into small undulating ridges, and peppered with stones and boulders and black irregular splashes that might have been masses of dead seaweed. And forlorn hulks that had once been ships lying broken and awry. But no water—only a thin wavering line that gleamed needle-like in the far distance—the final glistening rivulet that was the Channel.

Carey was circling, and presently they were moving back towards the coast. The helicopter lost altitude, and then speed. They were hovering above a strip of sand, and the buildings of a coastal town glowed geometrically about a mile away. Looking down Wade saw

barbed wire and military vehicles and concrete pill boxes, and nearer the town, a tall, slim steel trellis tower bearing a rotating radar aerial.

The helicopter followed the outline of the coast for a few miles. The shadow of the aircraft flitted like a gigantic black moth across the barren ground below. Carey turned to him abruptly and pointed. Following the direction of his arm Wade looked out and down into the gray-yellow of the Channel bed.

He saw tanks—five or six of them—creeping slowly forward across the sunbaked mud and sand, and behind them people—some twenty or thirty—in long straggling lines, following the tanks. Something flashed brilliantly for an instant among the tanks, and smoke billowed outwards, but there was no sound above the throb of the helicopter engine. Wade glanced shorewards and saw the field guns behind the barbed wire fence, and even as he watched, one of the guns belched smoke, and simultaneously another explosion burst among the tanks.

Fascinated, he witnessed the battle between the invaders from across the Channel and the coastal defenders. Carey's voice resonated crisply in his ears via the intercom.

"This kind of thing goes on all the time. When things get tough the Air Force intervenes."

"But tanks . . .?" Wade queried.

"Renegade troops from France or Belgium, followed by hangers-on. They think force of arms will get them through. At least they'll die fighting."

"What would happen if our own troops deserted and became renegades?" Wade asked.

"We may yet find out—the hard way," Carey said enigmatically.

9. Zero Absolute

IT WAS inevitable that cholera should penetrate even the defences of the official government zones. The first cases were reported in Whitehall, and then two of the girls in the Filter Room of Consort Building were rushed to an emergency hospital. Cholera was confirmed. Within four days there were eight more cases of cholera, and one of the victims was, ironically, the hale and hearty Major Carey himself.

After Carey's death Wade found himself promoted to the full status of Intelligence Officer, but the promotion was meaningless, for the work of the Bureau was beginning to disintegrate. The *National Express* had ceased publication because of the sheer impossibility of adequate distribution, and there had been no issue of *Comment* for several weeks. Furthermore, the international communications network seemed to be in the process of breaking down; many of the I.B.I. stations had gone off the air, and the majority were erratic and unreliable. There were rumors of insurrection and sabotage in various countries, and it appeared to Wade that in the growing crisis the maintenance of channels of communication had a very low priority.

In Britain martial law was reaching an unprecedented degree of applied ruthlessness in an effort to prevent lawlessness and the mass migration of the population. The rationing system, although still officially functioning, had

ground to a standstill, for it had become common practice for the strong—and that meant those with arms and weapons—to take what they wanted from the weak. The only reliable sources of food and water were the dispensation centers set up and administered by the military, but they were hopelessly inadequate. A sinister factor began to influence the death statistics: high as were the cholera figures, they were rapidly being overtaken by deaths from thirst and general malnutrition.

Wade's increasing uneasiness was underlined one morning when a message over the intercom asked him to go to Colonel Brindle's office. The Colonel was sitting morosely at his desk, his long jaw sadder than ever. He waved Wade into a chair and said nothing. A few moments later the door opened again and Lieutenant Patten came in. Brindle became more animated.

"Sit down, Patten," Brindle said. "I have asked you both to come here because a policy decision has just arrived from Sir Hubert Piercy's office. I'll be brief. This department will be closing down at short notice in the very near future. The entire staff will fly by helicopter relay to a temporary transit camp near Bletchley, where the I.B.I. transmitters are installed. From there we shall be evacuated to the Arctic as soon as air space is available."

"Excellent," Patten murmured. Brindle nodded shortly. "I imagined you would be relieved. However, it may not be so easy. You will understand that the fact that we are abandoning our task indicates what I can only describe as the final break-up of civilized order in this country. Until now we have been protected by the mili-

tary, and the military, I need hardly remind you, have been well looked after. But the supply position is deteriorating, and there have been distinct signs of restiveness among the troops. Yesterday, for instance, air force and army units near Liverpool mutinied and stole six aircraft from Speke airport, presumably in an attempt to fly to the Arctic zones."

"How long can we expect security to hold good, Colonel?" Wade asked.

Brindle shrugged. "Frankly, I don't know. A few days, perhaps. The country's existing water stock is about one week. After that—a mere trickle from the Messiter pipelines, if they survive sabotage."

"Don't you think we ought to get out now, sir?" Patten inquired anxiously.

"All in good time. The process of evacuation is going on all the time. You will understand that there has to be a predetermined order of priority in these things."

"I guess our priority must be rather low," Wade remarked.

"Low enough," Brindle agreed. "And that is a very good reason why the evacuation must take place as quickly and as efficiently as possible, once the movement orders are received."

"When is that likely to be, Colonel?" Wade asked.

"I'm not sure. Two days—perhaps three. In the meantime I think it will be advisable to destroy all documents and code and cypher records and equipment. Superficially there would appear to be no need, but one can never quite foresee the future, and it is wise to leave no evidence behind."

"Evidence?"

"I mean evidence that could be used to show that the government

had acted irresponsibly in this crisis. If, for instance, a small group should survive and eventually restore adequate water supplies, they would clearly attempt to seize authority. At a future date the government of this country may wish to return from the Arctic base. There might be conflict, and it will certainly help our case if nothing remains to indicate the way in which the survival program was decided and carried out."

Wade nodded slowly. "That's a pretty clear admission that they've got a case."

"Of course they've got a case," Brindle said irascibly. "You know that as well as I do. They've got a good case, just like the million Jews that Hitler destroyed in the gas chambers and ovens of his concentration camps. Only he did it positively—we are doing it negatively."

Patten said uneasily: "I'd like to know what is really happening out there—beyond the barricades, among the ordinary men and women and children of London and the world. We've been sheltered from it all. We've built up a picture in our minds from reports and data and statistics. We know as much about the outside world as the average astronomer knows about conditions as they really are on Mars. It's all remote observation and computation and probably far from the truth."

"Sure," Wade remarked sourly. "We, the detached. I'll tell you, Patten—I've had one or two brushes with the outside world as you call it. They weren't pleasant. To hell with the outside world."

Patten frowned and tightened his jaw in protest.

"It's a funny thing," Wade went on, "but there was a time when I

deliberately sought to escape from the outside world. I drank heavily. I used alcohol as a protective screen. Now there's no alcohol and I don't need it anyway. There's still the protective screen, and for us life is a quaint dream far removed from the terrible reality. Maybe that's why Sir Hubert picked on me, anyway—maybe he'd figured the way I'd react when the crisis really broke."

"Maybe he also figured you'd fall in love with Susan Vance," Patten suggested acidly.

Wade scowled. "Maybe you should mind your own business."

Colonel Brindle tapped politely on the desk with his knuckles. "Relax, gentlemen. This is neither the time nor the place for personal feuding. Anyway, Wade is right. The outside world has changed considerably. It has become alien to us, and we are no longer of it. Incredible things are happening. You think, perhaps, that rape and murder are the ultimate sins. I can tell you this—in certain parts of Europe where drought and famine have reached desperate proportions there are authenticated reports of cannibalism. It's only a matter of time before that kind of thing starts happening over here. Before the end there will be a Black Market in human blood to drink and human flesh to eat. The community will dissolve into tribes, preying on each other. Mankind will revert to the animal phase, and a million years of evolution will have evaporated completely."

"I can't believe it," Patten said sullenly. "It will never be as bad as that. In the end there will still be courage and human dignity, and people will die honorably."

Brindle's lips moved slowly into a thin, twisted line. "People will

die honorably when they have a future to die for, when they can sacrifice their lives to preserve and protect all that they cherish. They will die honorably if their minds are free from the stress of thirst and hunger. Those conditions don't apply, Patten. There is no future for them, and their courage can preserve and protect nothing, and in the long run deprivation and malnutrition will turn them all into desperate beasts. And we can do nothing about it—except save ourselves."

"In all conscience—have we the right to save ourselves?" Patten demanded hollowly.

"I'm afraid conscience has very little to do with it," Brindle pointed out. He stood up and came over to the two men, regarding them with a certain fixed melancholy. "Take my advice. Be circumspect. Treat the people out there"—and he waved one hand vaguely at the wall—"as an enemy. In the long run that is exactly what they are, and they may yet stand between us and safety."

Wade nodded in agreement, but Patten was lost in a subdued mood of gloomy introversion.

The next day Susan Vance came into Wade's office, closed the door quietly, kissed him lightly and said: "Do you love me, Phil?"

"You know I do."

She held on to him for a moment. "What's going to happen to us in the next few days? I've heard about the evacuation. I've been worrying ever since."

Wade embraced her gently. "I thought we'd agreed to be logical about everything, Sue. Borrowed time, remember?"

"I'm trying to be logical, darling, but it's so hard."

Wade released her and sat on the corner of his desk. "I wish to God I had a cigarette," he said vehemently. "And a bottle of Scotch."

"I take it they'll send you back to your wife and son."

"That would seem to be the official procedure."

"Do you want to go back?"

Wade did not answer immediately.

"Why can't we stay together?" she asked. "Does everything have to come to a stop because our work here is finished?"

"I don't know," said Wade. "I've been very happy here with you. And in a way that seems wrong in itself. What right has anyone to happiness in a world on the brink of annihilation? Aren't there some things more important than the pursuit of happiness?"

"I love you," he said.

They kissed again, more intently, and when it was over Susan detached herself from his embrace and walked across the room, keeping her back towards him.

"I'm scared and unsettled, Phil. I need reassuring. That's why I had to come and see you."

"Anything wrong?" he asked.

She turned to face him abruptly. "Well, in the first place I'm pregnant—at least, I think I am."

I'm not surprised, Wade was about to say, but thought better of it. He went over to her and took her hand. "That makes a difference, Sue," he said.

"Why should it?"

"Oh—you know me. I've got a thing about responsibility."

"Phil—I didn't choose to be pregnant in order to get a hold on you."

He smiled. "I know, honey. But now that you've got a hold

on me—I think I rather like it."

That pleased her as it was meant to, but in a moment her expression became solemn again.

"Phil—I've been selfish. I've talked about myself. More important things are happening around us."

"More important?"

"Yes. I don't know if you've heard about Lieutenant Patten . . ."

"No."

"Last night he committed suicide. Just—hanged himself—in his room at the Waldorf."

Wade stared at her aghast for a moment. "But why . . . ?"

"I don't know. For a long time he's been strange in his manner—introspective and embittered."

"I think I know why," he said. "Towards the end Patten had conscience trouble. He seemed unable to reconcile the idea of deliberate and unscrupulous governmental survival tactics with the inevitable fate of the mass of humanity. He had principles, and in this day and age principles are obsolete. He was a misfit."

"You're probably right," Susan admitted quietly. "I'm afraid I didn't care much for Patten, though he knew his job. But I'm sorry just the same."

"Maybe he's better off. Maybe we'll envy him in the course of time."

"I can't believe that," she said. After a pause she continued: "There's one disturbing item of news. A serious fire has broken out in the East Ham area. During the night the government allocated one thousand gallons of water in an attempt to keep the fire under control, but by the time they got the bowsers and pumps into position the fire had spread and the water was worse than useless."



Flaming death lay in all directions.

"So—what happened . . . ?"

"The fire is spreading. The last report, half an hour ago, put the flame front at Mile End—up as far as Leyton and beyond. With the wind stiffening from the east the fire is advancing quickly towards the city."

"Sounds serious," Wade commented.

"It's worse than that, Phil. Everything is tinder dry, and there's no water. They're using explosives to demolish houses at Bethnal Green to try to check it, but the reports are sketchy and very much delayed."

Wade pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Funny thing how history repeats itself. I mean—the Black Death—cholera in London, and the Great Fire of London in 1666. It's all happening over again, only this time on a much grander scale, and with no possibility of any kind of future."

"The casualties are heavy," Susan said. "Two hospitals were gutted before they could get the patients out."

"What are the prospects?"

"Either they'll control the fire with explosives, or it will continue to spread while the wind keeps up. It may even reach us here."

"That might be a blessing. It would certainly precipitate the matter of evacuation for us."

She looked at him ruefully. "I agree so much, Phil, but it still sounds callous when you say it that way."

"Not callous—just objective. We might put it to Brindle that there's a strong case for jumping the gun."

"The Colonel has to obey orders."

"I'm beginning to wonder why. In fact I'm beginning to wonder whether anyone has the right to

give orders under present-day conditions."

She placed a restraining hand on his arm. "That's the kind of attitude we're supposed to be fighting, Phil—the mood of anarchy—indiscipline. At the first sign of mutiny in any of us we'd be thrown to the wolves on the other side of the barricades."

He took her hand in his and squeezed it amiably. "Maybe you're right, Sue. In any case, there's not much danger of mutiny. They picked their types too well. Most of us have remained consistently unmoved by the whole bloody business."

"Except Patten."

"He was unmoved enough, but in the end broke down under the strain."

"I suppose you're right. Do you think there's any danger that we might break down too in time, Phil?"

Wade took her in his arms for a few moments. "Individually we might, but together—no. Not while we can hold on to each other and shut out the world from time to time. That way we stay sane."

"I like staying sane that way," she murmured.

Presently she returned to her office.

In the early afternoon Wade and Susan Vance went on to the roof of the Consort Building to join some two dozen other members of the staff who were viewing the distant smoke pall over East London. The panorama was depressing, and the smoke haze was thick enough to make the air pungent to breathe. Towards the East End the sky was a leaden gray with a hint of orange glow reflecting from the smoke cloud near the horizon.

As he watched Wade saw three distinct flashes of amber light beyond the skyline. Seconds later came a remote multiple concussion like the distant blast of anti-aircraft shells.

"Dynamiting in progress," Susan remarked.

"And not too far away," Wade added. "Certainly nearer than Bethnal Green."

"How near?"

"Difficult to say exactly. The city—Aldgate—perhaps nearer—as near as St. Paul's."

She took his arm and clung to him. "If things were that bad they wouldn't allow us to stay here."

Thoughtfully Wade stared into the black and orange haze. "It could be that they don't know. Communications don't seem to be very reliable." A moment later, in a voice that implied decision, he added: "I'm going to take a look for myself."

She reacted in alarm.

"Don't worry, honey. I'm not going to mix with the wolves. I'll use a helicopter." Noting her lack of comprehension, he went on: "A quick trip over the fire zone. It's the only way to get accurate information."

"Phil," she said anxiously, "a helicopter isn't a bomber, and it's a long, long time since you ever flew a plane."

"I flew a helicopter a few times in the final year of the war. I know the ropes."

"Won't you need to get Colonel Brindle's permission?"

He squeezed her arm reassuringly. "There are times in life, Sue, when it's more expedient to take small matters like permission for granted."

"Then take me with you."

"No," he said firmly.

"Why not, Phil—because it's dangerous?"

"There's no danger. It's just that—well, what I'm going to do may be regarded as a breach of discipline. Better for one of us to risk censure than two."

"I'm not worried about censure," she insisted. "I want to come with you."

In the end, because she flatly refused to be left behind, he consented, and around three o'clock they left the building as unobtrusively as possible and made their way towards the Aldwych heliport.

There were, in fact, four helicopters on the concrete landing ground, and the area was fenced off and adequately guarded. Wade and the girl had to identify themselves before they were admitted, and they promptly made their way towards the small control tower overlooking the port. The controller was a small sleepy-eyed man with dark tousled hair. He glanced up briefly as they entered the control room, then carried on writing something on a sheet of printed paper.

He said: "Yes?"

"I'm Philip Wade, I.B.I. Intelligence Officer. This is Miss Vance of Cyphers."

The controller looked up without much interest.

"I want a helicopter for about half an hour. Colonel Brindle thinks it might be a good idea to get a bird's-eye view of the fire."

The controller shrugged. "You got a written authorization?"

"No—but you can check with the Colonel."

The controller lifted the phone and began to dial.

Wade said: "You won't be able to get the Colonel right now. He went over to Whitehall."

Slowly the controller replaced the phone, eyeing Wade doubtfully, but not suspiciously. "It's irregular, Mr. Wade, but if Colonel Brindle said so, then it's okay by me. Better take B for Baker. She's fuelled up and ready for take-off."

"Thanks," said Wade.

"Half an hour, you said?"

"That's right."

They left the control tower and walked across to the helicopter with the scarlet B beneath the I.B.I. insignia. He helped Susan into the tiny compartment and took his place in the pilot's seat. Although the controls differed from those he had seen and used during the war, he had taken the opportunity to study them during his recent trip to the south coast with the deceased Major Carey, and they were now familiar enough. He started the rotor leisurely, making each step of the pre-flight preamble with careful precision. The girl watched him with mild interest, but her thoughts were remote.

"It would be nice," she said quietly, "if we were leaving London for ever. Now, I mean, in this helicopter. Just you and me, flying to the Arctic zone."

"This old bus would never make it," Wade commented. "She doesn't carry enough fuel."

"There's no harm in wishing."

"I guess not."

His hand moved on the controls and the noise of the engine surged in pitch and volume, and the concrete slipped away from beneath them. The control tower was already falling obliquely and diminishing in size. It became a toy building among the many toy buildings of the Aldwych area, and the dry sombre bed of the Thames curved sullenly to the south.

Wade took the machine up to a thousand feet, then hovered for a while to get his bearings. From this altitude he could see the fire—not in so many distinct flames, for visibility was poor, but as an undulating orange glare beyond the dome of St. Paul's cathedral, in the direction of Liverpool Street. The smoke was drifting beneath them now, riding the wind, and obscuring the finer detail of the maze of streets below. His hand moved on the controls, and the machine moved gently towards the distant fire.

It was worse than he had imagined. From a hover point above Mansion House, beyond St. Paul's, he could see the perimeter of the blaze, flickering in gigantic tongues of fire over Moorgate and northwards towards Old Street and City Road. Liverpool Street was already engulfed, it seemed, as was the heart of the city, centering on Bank and Monument. The black belching smoke turned day into night, so that the streets below became lost in the swirling gloom. He reduced altitude, descending to five hundred feet, then four hundred, until it became possible to perceive what should have been Cannon Street, but the thoroughfare had lost all shape, and was part of a wilderness of shattered masonry and concrete stretching beyond the limits of visibility to the north and south. High explosives had obviously done their job well, but even so Wade found himself doubting whether the man-made desolation of razed buildings would prove an effective barrier; indeed, so far as he knew there had been other barriers, further to the east, and yet the fire was advancing.

He flew the helicopter towards

the north, keeping the flame front within clear visibility and maintaining an altitude of four hundred feet. Immediately below the desolation continued, cutting across the built-up area of streets and houses in a broad ribbon of rubble some two hundred yards wide. At Essex Road the demolition came to its end, and here Wade was disconcerted to note that the fire had already outflanked the blown-up zone.

He dropped lower to observe more clearly if there were any human activity in the roads below, but the vertical viewpoint was deceptive. Something was moving at speed along Essex Road—probably a military truck—but there was no sign of people, no sign of evacuation or of the movement of population. He assumed that any necessary evacuation had already taken place, but at the same time he could not suppress a suspicion lurking in the dark depths of his mind that perhaps no attempt at evacuation had been made whatever; it might even be that authority had decreed that, in cholera-ridden London, any decrease in the population was bound to be a good thing.

"I think we ought to go back," came Susan's voice over the intercom.

Wade nodded without answering. Something within him responded to the depressed anxiety in the girl's voice. It wasn't good to be outside the barrier and away from the security of the government zone. Consort Building and the Waldorf were located at the still calm center of the hurricane, and it was a bad thing to be detached from that point of self-preservation, even in a helicopter at three hundred feet above ground level.

His hand tightened on the control lever, about to climb away from the crushed remains of smoking London, and in that same instant the ground north of Essex Road exploded into sudden incandescent fury. Wade froze, astounded, and Susan's fingers clutched at his arm.

As he watched the ground seemed to rise up on a tidal wave of liquid fire. Buildings disintegrated into jagged fragments, arcing and weaving, silhouetted blackly against the angry orange background. The glow faded, and a moment later the blast wave seized the helicopter and shook it turbulently. Debris clattered on the dural of the fuselage and ricocheted from the whirling blades of the rotor. Susan screamed shrilly in the intercom.

"It's all right," Wade said urgently, fighting the sickness that threatened to twist his abdomen into paralysis. "It's all right, Sue. Just demolition work. We got a bit too close."

It was over. The high explosives had done their job and the debris was falling torrentially back to the ground. The helicopter was swamped in soaring black smoke, and all sight had disappeared beyond the reinforced glass of the windows, some of which were starred and semi-opaque from the impact of flying masonry.

He switched on the cabin light and glanced reassuringly at Susan's white face. She made a thin smile, frightened and unconvinced. He looked at the instruments. The altimeter needle was moving slowly, creeping downwards towards zero. He pulled on the control column and cut in the auxiliary boost, but the engine merely shuddered, and presently he

realized that something was seriously wrong — uncontrollably wrong. Damage, perhaps, to the rotor, or to the engine itself.... At all events the machine was losing altitude, slowly but steadily.

The smoke was still about them and he could see nothing, but he made a computation and turned towards the west, as he visualized it. He stared in fascination at the altimeter — one-eighty feet — one seventy—one sixty. . . .

"Sue, honey . . ." he said. "We're not going to make it. We're going to crash. . . ."

Her voice was strained and toneless. "Please try, Phil. Please try. . . ."

"I'll do my best. With luck we ought to get as far as High Holborn. If I can put her down gently we'll be able to walk back to Kingsway. . . ."

The smoke cleared quite suddenly, and there, not more than ten feet below the helicopter were the flat roofs of tall buildings. Desperately Wade manipulated the controls, but the buildings rose stubbornly towards them, and long before he reached it he recognized the point of impact as a concrete parapet adjoining a row of chimney stacks adorned with forlorn, twisted television aerials.

The shock of the collision was less than he had anticipated. For a brief instant he thought it would be all right—that the machine would simply grind to a halt among the chimney stacks and aerials, but he had underestimated the speed of descent. The helicopter smashed its way through the stacks, spinning and lurching wildly, then hurtled broadside against a massive stone coping at the edge of the roof. It tilted. The rotor threshed the air then struck

brickwork and disintegrated. A moment later the crippled aircraft had fallen over the edge of the roof towards the road some ten storeys below.

The final drop lasted for a small eternity. Wade reached out for Susan, but she was slumped over her seat and appeared to be unconscious. He grappled with the controls for the last time. And then the world dissolved in a confusion of noise and blinding light. . . .

10. Desperation Total

SOMEBODY had lifted his head and allowed it to drop back onto a hard surface. Pain burned throughout his body. His legs were twisted beneath him and were quite numb from below the knees. Pungent air irritated his nostrils, air tainted with acrid smoke and swirling heat, and voices made sounds in the air, but the sounds were meaningless.

He opened his eyes with considerable effort and found himself looking through a mass of distorted metal and broken glass towards a dark brooding sky crawling with streamers of angry smoke. The voices came more sharply to his ears, and, turning his head painfully, he observed khaki-clad figures moving over bent and broken fragments of dural. The figures were manhandling a limp human shape that looked vaguely familiar, though the identity escaped him for the moment.

Fragments of conversation began to take on meaning.

"The man's alive but unconscious."

"Leave him for now. The girl's more important."

"Down here. I'll check her over."

"Right arm looks pretty shapeless."

"It's broken. May be crushed ribs, too. Pity—she's a good looker, and young enough."

"She's all right from the waist down, isn't she?"

"We can soon find out."

"Joe, there isn't time for what you've got in mind. It'll take twenty minutes to get the H.E. chain wired up. Best thing we can do is finish them both off and get the job done. The fire's getting too close as it is."

"Don't be a damn pessimist, Bill. We can be through with her in a few minutes—all of us. How about that church hall over there? Nice and private like."

"All right, but we'll have to make it quick."

The figures had picked up the shape and were carrying it across the roadway, Wade saw. The shape was a girl and recognition seeped sluggishly into his brain. It was Susan Vance, of course. For a long time he was unable to understand what was happening, or what Susan was doing in the hands of half a dozen soldiers. And then the bombshell exploded in his mind, and terror and anger ran wild in his arteries.

Momentarily lost in an unreasoning panic, he pushed himself stiffly to his feet, but his numb legs collapsed immediately, and he fell among the twisted ruin that had been the helicopter. Again he stood up, holding on to a jagged spar for support, then thrust himself forward.

"Stop!" he shouted. "Stop!"

The soldiers stopped and looked round. One of them walked slowly back towards him, swinging a rifle by its strap. A young fellow, tall

and lithe, but with brutality in his narrow eyes.

"What's the beef, chum?" the soldier asked mildly.

"Leave her alone," Wade said fiercely. "Go back and tell them to leave her alone."

The soldier grinned amiably. "You wouldn't want to spoil a bit of harmless fun, would you, chum? Share and share alike these days, you know. Besides, we don't see many women—they keep themselves hidden away, 'specially the young ones. . . ."

"In the name of humanity . . ." said Wade.

"Out of date, aren't you chum? There ain't been no humanity round these parts for a long time. You take what you can get when you can get it."

"Look," said Wade in desperate appeal, "she's hurt—badly hurt. She needs medical care . . ."

"Sure—she's got a broken arm. She ain't likely to put up much of a fight. And as for medical care—there isn't any. The hospitals are full. We've orders to shoot serious casualties to save them suffering."

The soldiers were moving on again, carrying Susan's inert body. Wade reached out for the other man's arm, but he moved away suspiciously, raising the rifle.

"I know a place," Wade said urgently. "In Kingsway—not far from here. If you'll help me get her back there. . . ."

"You talk too much, chum," said the soldier. He took the rifle by the barrel and swung it. The butt caught Wade on the side of the head, hurling him into the dural and glass debris, where he lay still.

The soldier then reversed the rifle and aimed it at his victim, but an abrupt scream from the other side of the road drew his attention.

He glanced back. The group were at the entrance to the church hall, and from this distance it seemed to him that the girl had regained consciousness. There appeared to be some kind of struggle taking place.

He slung the rifle over his shoulder and ran to join in the fun.

"Hold it!"

The terse command penetrated the pain and confusion of Wade's mind in an immense authoritative voice. He fought to regain the stability of his senses, to disperse the dark agonizing cloud that veiled his eyes. The soldiers were standing in a motionless group, and another figure was advancing from a gloomy side street—a burly, khaki-clad figure wearing chevrons and carrying a sub-machine gun in an enormous hand.

Slowly, like some kind of inhuman automaton, Wade dragged himself across the jagged wreckage of the helicopter. The left side of his face swollen and the bones of his jaw ached with every movement of his mouth. He brushed his cheek with a hand, and looked at the blood on his fingers without reaction. There was a chill ice in his brain and a passionate loathing for the men in uniform who had taken Susan Vance away—a loathing that extended far beyond the point of focus to embrace all troops and all people of this, the sub-human world beyond the barrier.

The fire seemed nearer than ever; beyond the rooftops sparks drifted and danced in the writhing smoke, and the roar of the flames was the sound of a hungry furnace. He looked towards the khaki group by the church hall, then cautiously picked himself up and limped unsteadily from the debris. In a moment the big newcomer was hold-

ing his arm, supporting him roughly. Wade found himself looking into the red, exasperated but not unkindly face of a sergeant.

"Bloody civilians," said the sergeant with considerable feeling. "As if we haven't got enough trouble!" Then, turning to the others: "Put her down!"

They laid the body of Susan Vance on the gray concrete slabs of the pavement. She moved spasmodically, groaning a little. Their eyes were sullen and resentful, but they had not yet lost all respect for authority.

"We were only going to find somewhere to make her comfortable . . ." murmured a subdued voice. The sergeant laughed cynically.

"A likely bloody story!" He swung the sub-machine gun with facile competence. "You think this is some kind of spree? A free for all? Well, you're wrong!" He turned abruptly to Wade. "You with her?"

Wade nodded.

The sergeant took a deep breath. "You ought to be hanged, mate, bringing a woman out in this lot."

Wade indicated the remains of the helicopter. "We were flying over the fire zone. Got caught by . . . blasting. She's hurt bad."

"Where are you from?" demanded the sergeant.

"Information office—Government zone . . ."

The sergeant uttered an obscenity. He glared balefully at Wade. "Why the hell don't you keep out of it, mate? You can't help. Don't you know that? I've got a platoon of good men, but they've taken a big knock, and there ain't much gallantry left in them. They're no different from anyone else these

days. They don't take kindly to government types, and they go crazy at the sight of a woman, whether she's hurt bad or not. We've got a job to do—demolition and destruction. That kind of thing gets a hold of you. Nothing's important any more, and nothing matters. All we want is to be left to get on with the job."

"All right," Wade said wearily. "I have to get her back to Kingsway. I'll need help."

"I wouldn't trust anyone of them to help you, mate. Bloody conditions breed bloody behavior."

"Then we'll make our own way. . . ."

"And the best of luck, mate. It's a good job I came on the scene. Another N.C.O. would have had you both shot, but I'm a family man. Wife and six kids up in Rutland—still alive, though God knows how. That's why I like to keep my hands clean."

"Thanks," Wade said simply, but the sergeant scowled.

"Clear out," he ordered. "Take her and clear out, mate. We're blasting in a few minutes. And if you make it, keep your fingers crossed for Sergeant Slade. Now clear out."

Clumsily, aware of his tremendous physical weakness, Wade helped Susan Vance to her feet. She was hardly conscious, and only capable of slight effete movements. Under the narrow surveillance of the silent troops he dragged her along the pavement, away from the fire, in the direction of Kingsway. The voice of the sergeant sounded remotely in his ears, issuing incomprehensible orders. Thank God for the sergeant, he thought, holding the girl tightly. Thank God for a human being.

It had become all too obvious

that the girl couldn't make it; she was sagging in his arms and dragging her feet along the ground, and for all he knew she was unconscious. In a sudden surge of desperate strength he picked her up bodily, and staggered forward, then caught sight of her broken arm lying twisted and grotesque across her body. An irrational logic possessed his tormented mind—he realized suddenly and obsessively that he would have to do something about it. Already the flesh around the fracture was purple and swollen.

He turned abruptly into a side street and put her down in the doorway of a derelict office block, propping her against the rough gray concrete of the wall.

"Sue," he said, slapping her cheek gently. "Sue."

She opened her eyes mechanically; there was no intelligence in them.

"This is Phil. I'm going to leave you for a moment. I've got to find something to fix that arm of yours with."

There was no reaction or response.

Quickly he glanced round. The street was drab and desolate. It was as if every human being had been evacuated from the area—and that, he realized with a shock, was probably the truth. For all he knew the street beneath and around him might be dynamited into complete disintegration at any instant as part of the fire-fighting procedure.

Viciously he kicked at the door of the office block, but it was securely bolted from the inside. He moved round to the windows, observing that the panes of glass had been broken and shattered already, perhaps by the blast of re-

cent explosions. Cautiously he swung himself on to the sill of a ground floor window, and eased himself through the jagged periphery of the broken glass hole. At least his needs were simple enough—some lengths of rigid wood—desk rules if it came to the point. With the aid of his shirt he could fix up a splint and protect Susan's broken arm from further damage.

But the rooms were empty, with no furniture or fittings, and even the floor coverings had been stripped. With a sense of increasing panic he ascended the spiral stairs to the second and third storeys, but there was nothing. From a fragmented window at the rear of a building he found himself looking down into a small courtyard in which was a rusted, useless car and a wooden crate. Triumph leaped momentarily in his veins.

He rushed headlong down the stairs and crashed through a flimsy basement door into the courtyard. The crate was empty, but strongly built. Quickly he looked around for some kind of tool with which to dismantle it. In the car, perhaps. . . .

But the car was a mere shell from which the seats and instruments and most of the engine had been stripped. He tugged vainly at the front bumper, hoping to dislodge it, but it remained stubbornly fixed to the chassis. When he abandoned the attempt his hands were brown with flaking rust.

The outside door to the courtyard was open, and he passed through it into another silent street. Somewhere, he thought, there must be a heavy object—even a brick. Time was running out, and he could not afford to

leave the girl alone for much longer. He began to run along the street towards a cross-road—and suddenly he was back in High Holborn.

He made a quick computation, checking his sense of direction. Better get back to Susan first, then make a final assault on the crate. Quickly he walked to the next turning.

A whistle sounded remotely. He looked up towards the smoke-swollen sky livid with the orange glow of the great fire, and a cold twisting fear began to curl in his abdomen. This isn't real, he told himself. It could never come to this. All the genius and ingenuity of mankind—could never let things go this far. It was all a nightmare and they would awake in the calm security of Kingsway. . . .

He rounded the corner, his heart throbbing uncontrollably. Susan was still there, where he had left her, half sitting, half lying, in the angle of the doorway. As he hurried towards her the distant whistle sounded again.

A curious thing happened. The entire street rose into the air on a cushion of roaring fire and his body rose and spun in an agonizing whirling jig as the entire world exploded.

His body was stiff and cold, as if already set in *rigor mortis*, and a great weight bore down on him, and there was the stench of death in his nostrils. The air throbbed with distant explosions and somewhere remote a siren wailed forlornly. He opened his eyes but could see nothing immediately recognizable: around him and below him and on top of him were curious inert shapes in white and pink and crimson.

He turned his head and found himself looking into a dead face with frosted eyes and gaping mouth. The eyes bored sightlessly into his and the stiff lips were crusted with dark dried blood. He saw long brown hair tangled and clotted, and realized with a shock that the face was that of a woman.

Slowly he gained a sense of orientation and began to perceive the detail of his environment, and as his knowledge grew so his sense of horror increased. He was buried in a pyramid of naked corpses, one of a hundred or more bodies, male and female, piled in the center of wide road that might have been High Holborn or Oxford Street. The weight of the bodies pinned him down and paralyzed his movements, but gradually, with agonizing slowness, he was able to extricate his arms, and so wriggled free from the mound of death. He rolled over icy and rigid limbs and torsos to the ground where he lay for several minutes, recouping his energy.

And then, recalling recent events, he marvelled that he was still alive. He was completely naked, and his body bore the ugly marks of violence. Clotted blood stained his shoulder and his thigh. He inspected the wounds and realized, with a sense of irony, that he had escaped with flesh lesions—no more, no less. His left arm was sluggish and painful, but he was able to use his right arm effectively.

He looked around the deserted road and saw a further pile of bodies about a hundred yards away. The sky was dark, and not only because of the smoke; evening and night were already casting their veil over the horrors of Lon-

don town. The fire glowed dull orange over the rooftops and its unceasing roar echoed in his ears like surf on a beach.

Funeral pyres, he thought. The facile disposal of the dead. They thought I was dead, too, but I tricked them. Or, rather, fate tricked them. I'm not dead, yet—but I'm not far from it. What's to happen? The fire will pass this way and cremate the dead—or are there high explosives planted under this very road, destined to disintegrate everything into a common rubble of concrete fragments and shattered protoplasm?

Not all of the bodies were naked, he observed. Some still wore their own shabby clothing, and their drawn lifeless faces bore the imprint of disease—of cholera. He shuddered involuntarily, and shivered from cold. He needed clothing, and he knew what he had to do.

He spent a long time selecting his attire, as one might ponder the wares on a bargain counter, and presently, realizing that there was no time to waste, he robbed a corpse of a gray shirt and brown denim trousers and worn black shoes. Cholera infected, without a doubt, he told himself, but it didn't seem to matter. He was dressed and respectable—as respectable as a scarecrow, with all the energy of a deflated balloon, but he was alive—for the moment.

Susan might be there, he realized suddenly. She might be there, among those bodies, lying twisted and stiff in death, awaiting the devouring flames. She would almost certainly be there. She might be anyone of them, for they all looked alike, and in death they had lost their individuality. He hadn't the courage to look for her. He turned his back on the pyramid and



made his way haltingly away from the direction of the fire.

The pain he did not mind—it was to be expected—but the weakness that made him stumble and fall every few yards infuriated him. He cursed the incompetence of his legs, and fought the faintness that hovered at the back of his mind like a black cloud, ready to swoop upon him at any moment to destroy his consciousness. Be logical, he told himself. Be rational. Think, step by step. First—Susan is dead, but you have to make sure. She's one of the stacked bodies behind you, but if she isn't then she'll be in a doorway in a street off High Holborn. You have to get there—to High Holborn. It can't be far. This might be it—this stark desolate road. But it isn't.

You walk on and on, putting one foot before the other, holding your breath against the pain and

fatigue. You call it walking, but it's not. It's a shuffling, shambling progression, animal-like, zombie-like—but it's a progression for all that. But the direction is wrong, brother. You're moving away from the fire, and High Holborn is in the direction of the fire. You'd better turn round and go back.

Funny how the thirst comes over you, quite suddenly. Strange to feel thirst at all. A few minutes ago it hadn't existed, and now it's here—a coarse sandpaper feeling in the throat and a tongue that feels dry and rough and enlarged. It's the smoke and the fire and the exposure. A glass of water would be welcome. A large glass of water and then a large glass of whiskey. That's a laugh. There hasn't been any whiskey in the world for a thousand years.

Look around for a while. Look at the bleak deserted shops with



their smashed empty windows. Try to identify them. See anything you recognize, brother? That sign, about a hundred miles away, beyond the third block. The red and blue circular sign with the rectangular bar. An underground station? Could be. Walk a little nearer, and nearer, until you can see the name. Still too far—the letters can't be resolved. Nearer still, and nearer. And there it is—the landmark you've been hunting for—the point of identification.

Kingsway.

A surge of energy in your body—a spasmodic beating of a tired heart. This is it, brother. Kingsway—the haven of safety. The I.B.I. in Consort Building, the familiar faces, the Waldorf, and the helicopters. The merciful helicopters. Turn back again. Cross the road. Down the right-hand side, down towards Aldwych. It's not

far now. The next block. A few more yards. And here we are, brother. As easy as that. This is the Consort Building. It's in darkness, of course, but that's probably because the power has failed. No security guard on the door—that's careless, very careless. But go inside anyway, into the hollow darkness of the foyer, and down the shrouded stairs into the silent basement.

There's nobody here.

Colonel Brindle's office is empty. The Cypher office is empty. Your own office is empty. They've gone—all of them. They've left you behind. They've deserted you. And you were one of the survival group—but they've deserted you.

You're alone in a dying world.

When sanity returned, Wade found himself lying on the floor of his abandoned office in the Consort

Building, crying uncontrollably. The tears stopped abruptly, and he became possessed by a vast impersonal defiance—a defiance of fate, of nature, and of God. He stumbled around in the darkness, wondering how he had ever found his way into the basement of the building, and returned to Kingsway.

It was night, but the darkness was pregnant with the ominous glare of the fire beyond the rooftops. Slowly he limped away from Aldw~~o~~rn towards the underground station and High Holborn, and at the road junction by the inactive traffic lights he encountered a military patrol.

A flashlight swept over him and a harsh voice said: "Where d'you think you're going?"

"High Holborn," Wade said, appalled at the huskiness of his own voice. "I have to get to High Holborn."

"The entire area has been destroyed—and we're blowing up everything east of Tottenham Court Road in twenty minutes. Better get moving."

"Please," said Wade, "there's something I have to do . . ."

A boot moved swiftly in the darkness. Wade found himself rolling on his back gasping for breath.

"Get moving or be shot."

Wade picked himself up and staggered away from the probing beam of the inquisitive flashlight.

There was no bitterness or anger in him, only a cold impersonal acceptance of the facts of existence as they were in the here-and-now. He made his way towards New Oxford Street. London looked strange in the darkness—total darkness, without street lights, or traffic robots, or neon signs, or car

headlamps. The roads were black caverns between the sheer sides of empty hollow buildings, leading from nowhere to nowhere.

This is the pay-off, he thought. Part of the final disintegration of civilized society. First the drought, and then the fire, and in time the fire would sweep the whole country and the whole world, because the natural antidote to fire no longer existed. Everything that would burn must inevitably burn sooner or later, and fire and disease would account for the mass of humanity.

The brutality was to be expected. It was part of the dehumanizing process, the reduction of authority to more and more primitive levels. And in the end authority itself would disintegrate, and the military forces would themselves prey upon those they were assigned to protect, and then prey upon each other. And soon nothing would remain but isolated gangs and tribes, fighting for survival by the exercise of violence. The fire and the ice. Death and life.

In the polar zones life was going on in a normal if austere way, disciplined and principled. There were still ideals, and there was still chivalry, and humanity. Suddenly he felt immensely grateful that Janet was out of it all, and David too. They had been spared the final demoralization, and all they would ever know of it would be second-hand reports and hearsay—not even eye-witness accounts, for the survivors would be those who had been sheltered from the harsh, unbelievable truth—who had not seen for themselves the rapid dissolution of a dying society.

The helicopter mission had been a mistake. There had been no necessity to observe the outside

world and to witness the progress of the fire. It had been more than a mistake. It had been a tragedy. He had been responsible for the violent death of Susan, and had unwittingly cut himself off from his own kind. The evacuation of Consort Building had been rapidly and efficiently completed during his absence, and he could only conclude that the entire staff had been removed to the air base at Bletchley.

That then was his destination. It was the first stage on the return journey to his wife and child, and an essential step towards survival. Indeed, unless he could reach Bletchley swiftly and safely survival might well prove to be impossible.

He quickened the motion of his dragging feet, and soon found himself passing through a military cordon at the junction of Oxford Street and Tottenham Court Road.

"Step on it," they said. "We're blowing up the whole damn lot in seven minutes."

Wade pressed on in the darkness towards Oxford Circus, and now there were people, all moving west—thin haggard people, carrying cases and bundles, mostly men, but here and there an occasional woman ringed protectively by men. Hollow brittle people, like animated shells wrought in human shape. People with soulless eyes and desperate mouths. Hungry and thirsty people. And among them the weak, feverish people whose sunken dehydrated flesh hinted at cholera.

Wade had almost reached Argyll Street, home of the once famous Palladium, when the night sky exploded into garish yellow incandescence. The air pounded his ears with the tumult of detonated high explosive. Glancing back he saw London rearing up in an eruption

of fire, and soon debris began to fall around him so that he was forced to seek shelter in a derelict shop doorway.

Step by step they were razing London to the ground, and step by step the great fire was advancing, leaping across the zones of shapeless destruction, pursuing the stubborn humans to the limits of the city. Inevitably they would blow up the West End as far as Park Lane, and then the high explosive charges would be set in Bayswater and Victoria and the Edgware Road, and so the final retreat would go on.

You need a program, he told himself—a clear-cut program for survival. Let's face it—you're suffering from shock, in bad shape, and you've lost blood—you may have cholera for all you know. The clothes you are wearing belonged to a cholera victim. You need water and food and sleep. How long can you expect to survive in such a condition? Two days—possibly three?

In that time, brother, you've got to make Bletchley. In less than that time. You have to get there before the last aircraft takes off for the Arctic. When will that be? It's anybody's guess. You have to be at Bletchley tomorrow, or sooner.

Okay—that's logical. But how to get there? You need a car or a truck. No such things—except for a few military vehicles. So you have to steal a military truck. For that you need weapons. A knife, or a cosh, or a gun. And to use a weapon you need strength, and that means you must sleep.

So where can a guy sleep in comfort and safety? Break into a house, maybe—but the occupants would be hostile and as desperate as yourself. You need to have a

friend—someone you can rely on, like Shirley Sye in the old days.

He wondered about Shirley. Maybe she was dead, or maybe she had moved away, or maybe she was still making the best of life, if that's what you called it, in her shabby apartment in Lawrence Avenue. At all events he was at the bottom end of the Edgware Road, and Maida Vale was not too far away. He could walk it, slowly, in about half an hour.

I'll do that, he said aloud.

Funny thing really—to think that he had once walked out on Shirley, an eternity ago, it seemed, and now he was going back to her. That was a great joke. Even Shirley would have to laugh at that one.

The journey took longer than he thought, and it was fully an hour before he reached number seventeen Lawrence Avenue.

The front door was open, and the staircase had been stripped of carpet. He made his way upwards wearily, but with caution. The apartment was dark and silent, and there was a smell that he found repulsive.

On the landing he stopped and said: "Shirley!"

Silence mocked him.

He moved forward, arms outstretched, until he touched the cold smooth surface of a wall. He ran his hand along it until he reached a door, and felt for the knob. He went in.

The darkness was absolute, and in this room the abhorrent smell was stronger. It was the smell of staleness and decay—perhaps even the smell of death. He hesitated uncertainly.

"Shirley," he said quietly.

He moved forward again, very

slowly, until his legs touched something. Feeling with his hands he identified a bed. Shirley's bedroom. That was lucky, and it might have been the answer to a prayer. All he needed was a bed and the chance to sleep for a few hours, until daylight.

With a sigh he sat on the edge of the bed, then allowed his body to fall slowly backwards. The coverings were rumpled, and the sheet was chill and stiff; as his weight came upon it the material crackled and the smell of decay became more pungent. But he was in no mood to care. Exhausted to the point of coma he allowed the tension of his body to relax, and fell immediately into a deep, dreamless sleep.

11. Cold Salvation

WADE was awakened by loud explosions that seemed to shake the entire house. He was alert in an instant, groping in the confusion of his mind for memory and detail, and in a moment it all came back to him, and he groaned in utter weariness of spirit. Harsh sunlight was streaming through the curtainless window, glaring on faded patterned wallpaper, and illuminating the bed.

He got up and stared at the incredible condition of the sheet on which he had lain, not understanding the opaque discolored layer on it like brittle enamel—and then, abruptly, he realized that the entire bed was caked with the black-brown of dried blood. Perhaps Shirley's blood? He had no way of finding out.

But the revulsion within him

was a dispirited thing. He pushed the transient ghostly image of Shirley out of his mind and went out of the bedroom, walking lame-ly, his body stiff and painful. He went into the living room, now bare and stripped of furniture, and found himself face to face with a frail little man whose chin sprouted a wispy white beard. The little man was grinning toothlessly and holding a carving knife in bony fleshless fingers.

"Been waitin' for you," said the man in a high, cracked voice. "You got no right to be here. This is my place."

"Since when?" Wade asked, weighing up his opponent.

"Since two weeks. You got no right to be here."

"The woman who used to live here—did you kill her?"

"I never killed anyone. She was dead when I came here. Throat cut clean as a whistle. Job I had getting rid of the body—you wouldn't believe . . ."

"She was a friend of mine."

The little man shifted uneasily on his feet. "Well, just you get out of here, anyway. I don't want no trouble. Things is bad enough."

Wade reached out and took the knife from the other with a minimum of effort. He inspected it thoughtfully, then slipped it inside his shirt.

"You got no right to do that. You got no right to be here. . . ."

"No more have you," Wade said harshly, advancing a pace.

The little man backed away nervously. "I don't want no trouble. She was dead when I came here. Found the place open and empty. Just here—lying dead. I thought I'd live up here for a bit. Got me some food and water . . ."

"Where?"

The little man cackled, and cunning flickered in his eyes for an instant. "That's a secret. I've known men get themselves murdered for a can of water. But while it's a secret I can bargain with you. I ain't got long to go, anyway. I'm seventy-six. Not long to go. Why should I care?"

"I'm not a killer," said Wade. "Not yet, anyway. I know how to escape from all this. How to get to the Arctic. That's where I'm going, as soon as I've finished here."

"You don't," said the little man incredulously.

Wade grinned faintly. "But I do. All I have to do is get to a certain place, about forty miles from here. There are airplanes waiting."

"Forty miles is a long way, mister. You'll never make it."

"I will. I'm going to steal a military truck. And I'm going to steal guns. I'll make it."

The little man began to tremble with excitement. He came close to Wade and took his hand. "I do believe you mean it. I do believe so. Take me with you, mister. That's all I ask. Take me with you."

Wade framed his thoughts with dispassionate deliberation. "I might even do that. But first I need water and food."

"I've got water and food," the old man said eagerly. "Had a son who did some Black Market deals. Got hisself shot by the troops. Left me a crate of water cans and Heinz beans. You can share them. Only take me with you."

"Where are they?" Wade asked.

The little man moved towards the door, and Wade followed him into the bedroom, beyond the bed, to a corner of the room near the window. There the old man bent down and lifted a corner of the

worn lino, then removed a section of floorboard. Wade stooped and peered into the cavity.

There were about a dozen cans in the shadows under the floorboards, half of them green and labelled *Water*, and the others bearing a printed label depicting beans in tomato sauce. A banquet indeed, thought Wade, in these days of universal famine. He stood up and eyed the old man speculatively.

"I've played ball with you," said the other. "You'll take me with you now, won't you?"

I can't kill him, Wade thought. Not in cold blood when there's no threat. If he were like the others, there would be no problem—in a world of mad dogs one can be a mad dog too, and to hell with conscience. While there are still a few ordinary people about who haven't lost their humanity, then they have to be treated with humanity—or does that make sense? If I don't kill him, then someone else will. He's going to die anyway, when his little stockpile of food and water runs out, and the chances are he'll be robbed of it before then . . .

"You promised," insisted the old man, catching Wade's arm eagerly. "I've done my bit—now you'll have to take me with you."

Wade shook off the frail fingers with an impatient gesture. "I didn't promise anything," he pointed out. "Two of us would never make it. I may not even be able to make it on my own."

For an instant the old man's lips trembled, so that Wade thought he was about to cry, and then he went berserk. He leaped at Wade with incredible agility, shaking him and clawing at him with his skeletal

fingers. "You promised!" he shrieked. "You promised!"

The unexpected impetus of the attack nearly floored Wade, but he grasped the window ledge and maintained his balance. A moment later he pushed the old man away, clenched his fist, hesitated for an instant, then knocked him down. The slight body crashed to the floor, twitched for a while, then became still. Wade stroked his knuckles thoughtfully.

You'll have to get used to it, brother, he told himself. This is the way it's going to be, all along the line. If you let sentiment get a hold, then you're finished. You have to do business with the devil for the right to live.

He bent down and inspected the old man, satisfying himself that he was still alive, then he set about the cans with the carving knife, working quickly and with an uneasy sense of guilt and dejection. He ate two cans of beans and gulped down two pints of water. Then, as a precaution, he stuffed a can of water into the pocket of his trousers. Regretfully he surveyed the remaining cans—four of beans and three of water. Well, at least the old man would still have his feast.

He replaced the cans under the floorboards, then, noticing that the old man was stirring, quietly left the apartment and made his way down to the street.

Stealing a vehicle had not been so difficult after all, Wade reflected as he drove at a steady fifty miles per hour along the road to Bletchley. The vehicle was a small 15 cwt. Bedford truck, and it had been parked outside a garrison headquarters near Kilburn, in charge of a sergeant driver and guarded

by a corporal armed with a tommy-gun who paced the pavement and forced the few pedestrians and stragglers to make a detour.

Wade, ignoring the corporal's truculent gesture, had approached him cautiously, making as if he wished to talk to him, and then he stumbled and fell, deliberately, knocking the corporal's feet from under him. Almost before the sergeant in the truck had realized what was happening, Wade was in possession of the tommy-gun. The corporal, cursing luridly, grappled at his legs, and as Wade kicked himself free the sergeant produced a revolver and fired twice, but his aim was uncertain. Wade didn't stop to argue, but shot the sergeant there and then, and, opening the door of the cab, pulled his body out and left it on the pavement.

Within seconds he was driving furiously up Edgware Road, with the tommy-gun resting on the empty passenger seat beside him. The burst of machine gun fire that came from behind was already too distant to matter.

At Canon's Park he shot his way through a road block, and again at Watford, relying on speed, surprise and ruthlessness to get him through. And good luck, of course. Despite the odds he was still free and still alive, and his fatigue was slowly giving way to a sense of exultance. Another half an hour, he told himself, and I'll be back with my own kind—back with the survival group.

Driving from Leighton Buzzard towards Bletchley on the final lap he realized suddenly that he had no real idea where the airdrome was located. He stopped the truck and surveyed the panorama of the bleak, lifeless countryside that shivered and wavered in the sun-

glare, seeking a landmark, but there was nothing, only the brown dehydrated shells of trees and deserted farm buildings. He drove on and presently came upon a forest of steel pylons and masts spread over a large field. This, he assumed, was where the I.B.I. aerials had been installed, the huge rhombic aerials beamed at I.B.I. communication points in other continents. Somewhere close at hand would be the now inoperative I.B.I. transmitting and receiving station, and, logically, perhaps, the airdrome.

While he was ruminating in this way he became aware of the sound of gunfire. Again he stopped the truck and listened carefully to the remote staccato crackling, and behind it was another sound, subdued and swamped by the noise of the truck engine. He switched off the ignition, and immediately recognized the characteristic whine of a jet engine running up. Alarm clutched momentarily at his heart. He made a rough computation of the direction from which the noise was coming, then got back in the truck and drove off.

He came upon the airdrome suddenly. It emerged upon him in its wide functional flatness as he rounded a bend in the road. It was not so much an airdrome as an air-strip, probably a reconditioned derelict from the last war, and the new extended runway of steel planking gleamed blue-gray in the sunlight. In the foreground was a small group of control buildings, and at the remote end of the runway, perhaps a quarter of a mile distant, or more, stood a single white jet airliner.

Wade stopped the truck and made a more detailed survey of the scene. The gunfire seemed to be

coming from a black tangle of dead hedging about a hundred yards from the control tower, and as he walked nearer and his angle of view changed, he observed a large group of khaki-clad men behind the hedging. There was a machine gun, and there were rifles and carbines, and a heavy wooden box that might have contained hand grenades.

They were shooting towards the control tower, and now he could see their target. Parked in front of the tower on the concrete strip at the near end of the runway was a small single-decker bus, painted olive-green, with a Royal Air Force rondelle on the side. The windows of the bus had been smashed, and the sides were heavily punctured with bullet holes. Behind the bus he saw another group of people—about twenty or twenty-five men and women in civilian clothes, with a sprinkling of khaki-clad figures who looked like officers.

The situation began to crystallize in Wade's mind. He glanced from the bus to the jetliner and then to the hedging with the machine gun nest. It looked as if the troops guarding the airstrip had finally rebelled against the arbitrary nature of the survival evacuation program. They had seized a commanding position between the control tower and the aircraft and obviously had no intention of allowing the prospective passengers hiding behind the wrecked bus to make their escape. Whether their plans were any more advanced than that, Wade was unable to guess, but he imagined the mutiny had been spontaneous rather than premeditated.

The men and women behind the bus were probably the last remnants of the I.B.I. team awaiting

evacuation to the Arctic—perhaps even his own colleagues from Kingsway. But the balance of power was against them. True, they had a few revolvers, and were returning the insurgent fire at erratic intervals, but the troops had the supreme advantage of automatic weapons.

Wade debated the problem for a long time, trying to determine where his allegiance lay. He was in a good position to make a suicidal rear attack on the mutineers, but there was no hope of gaining control of the situation, and he didn't feel like suicide. He looked across the length of the runway to the distant jetliner, and now he could see that the fuselage door was open and minute figures were standing there, staring out of the cabin.

I've got to be impersonal about the whole damn business, Wade told himself. I've got to be a realist. I can't differentiate between the good and the bad, and in the long run it doesn't matter. In a situation like this the devil takes the hindmost. They all want to survive, every damn human being on the planet, and right now we're back where evolution left off—before the dawn of civilization. There is no entitlement to life—it has to be preserved by tooth and claw—more than that, by cunning.

I've done things I never thought possible, he thought, in a kind of spiritual desperation. I've killed men—but then, they would have killed me. I've come to accept violence and brutality, and I've desensitized myself to things that would have shocked me into insanity a few months ago. I've been confronted with sudden death—and yet there was no impact, or rather, the impact was swamped by the

overall impact of the death of the human species—the physical, moral and spiritual death. Hell, I never did react much, but now I react less and less with every passing minute.

Let's add up the score, brother. The world survives so long as you survive. At the moment of death the world comes to an end for you, and it has no further reality in the darkness of that other strange dimension. Maybe you've tried, in your own fashion, to do the decent thing among the gross indecencies of the day, but there's only one decent thing left to do, and that's to get back to Janet and young David, to restore the solid bond of the family and protect their future. All the mistakes and heartaches of the past—they don't matter any more. The future can be molded. . . .

The people in front of you now, shooting at each other in a final frantic gamble for the last plane out, are already empty shadows. They're your enemies—every one of them. They're studying their own interests, and they're all conforming to the survival behavior pattern. You've got to play them at their own game and win, brother. There's a long journey ahead, and you're on your own—alone and unaided.

Abruptly Wade made up his mind. He returned to the truck and took out the tommy-gun, then walked lamely back towards the aerodrome.

Near to the hedging, still unobserved, he crawled under the wire of the perimeter fence, and continued crawling towards the khaki-clad group. He managed to get within twenty yards of them before he was spotted, and in a fraction of a second half a dozen weapons were pointing at him.

"No," he shouted, "I'm a friend. I'm on your side."

One of them came towards him, a burly red-faced corporal swinging a Sten gun. Revolvers crackled from the direction of the control tower, and the corporal threw himself on the ground, pointing the Sten at Wade.

"We don't want no passengers," he growled.

"Look," Wade said urgently. "I can help you. Even if you take that plane you'll never be able to fly it. The crew will fight it out to the end and they'll sabotage it rather than give it up."

"Not if we're quick enough."

"You never could be. And if you forced the issue the plane could always take off in a hurry and abandon the lot of you—the passengers too. Why do you suppose the jets are running up?"

"Then what do you suggest?"

"I'm a qualified pilot. I can fly the plane."

"We still have to take it."

"We have to be subtle. I have a plan which may work."

The corporal eyed him speculatively for several seconds. "We could use a plan, if you're on the level, and you'd better be on the level for your own sake. Come on."

He led the way back to the group, and Wade followed, keeping close to the ground and never relaxing his grip on the tommy-gun.

There were about forty-five of them all together, mainly young men in battledress—dirty unshaven young men perspiring in the intense heat of the unshielded sun. But they were probably less dirty and unshaven than he was himself, Wade reflected. They were a mob, but not an undisciplined mob, and he was not slow to realize that

they needed strong, decisive leadership. He took the initiative immediately.

"Who's in charge?" he demanded.

"I am," said the corporal. "Name of Bates. Corporal Fred Bates."

Wade nodded. "All right, Fred. I'm Philip Wade—one time pilot, ex-journalist, and until recently a government official."

"He ain't one of us, Fred," said a different voice.

"Shut up," Fred ordered. "Listen to what Mr. Wade's got to say. He may have ideas. None of us here ain't."

"All right," Wade said, reclining uncomfortably on one arm. "First, you've got to put me in the picture. Who's in the plane right now?"

"The crew—four of them—and about six others—the brass hats."

"How did all this start?"

"Well, it really started when food and water supplies were cut off—about three days ago. We heard about the fire in London, and the plague. Then the airlift was doubled. Helicopters started bringing hundreds of civvies in, and jets took them away day and night. And then, last night, the civvies stopped arriving and the planes stopped coming. This here jet landed about two hours ago and got ready for take-off right away. So we begin to wonder what's going on. We're all thirsty and hungry and a bit bloody-minded."

Wade remembered the can of water in his pocket, but decided to keep it to himself. The future was still very uncertain.

"So we got hold of one of the civvies and beat him up a bit, just to get the truth out of him. He said this was the last plane out of Bletchley—perhaps out of England. There was nothing anyone could

do any more. The plague and fire were uncontrollable."

"All that plus thirst and hunger," Wade added.

"He said most of the people in this country would be dead within ten days."

"Probably right."

"So me and the boys had what you might call a conference. We didn't see as how we should be left behind. We decided to take over the plane, but we weren't quite quick enough. We've got most of the civvies and brass hats trapped behind the bus that was to take them over to the plane, but half a dozen went over in a staff car."

Wade stared steadily at the corporal, considering his words. "You realize you're in a spot. If you attempt to rush the plane it will take off. If you wipe out the civvies by the control tower it will still take off. If you play the waiting game you may find reinforcements coming up, or even bombers assigned to eliminate you. They're probably in radio contact with Air Force units right now—assuming any kind of military discipline exists anywhere in the country. At all events you can't afford to take that chance, and you can't afford to waste time."

"So what do we do?"

Wade stroked his chin thoughtfully. There were almost fifty soldiers in the group and the jet plane was probably already booked for its full complement of about thirty. They couldn't all survive, whatever happened, and that in itself threatened an ugly situation. But a plan was beginning to shape itself in his mind.

"Who's in charge of the civvies?" he asked.

"A civvy with a military handle. A Colonel Brindle."



Survival! Nothing else mattered.

Wade smiled grimly. "Interesting."

"He's in the plane."

"Fine. Now listen, Fred—Brindle is, or was, a colleague of mine. I know him pretty well. This is where we have to talk with the enemy."

"Talk?"

"A flag of truce."

The corporal spat on the ground. "The white flag counts for nothing. They'd shoot you down just the same—same as we would."

"Agreed. There is no place for honor. Brindle would shoot you just as you would shoot him. But he knows me. We're friends. He'd let me talk to him under the white flag."

"Not by yourself, you don't," said the corporal skeptically. "We are all in this together. What's to stop you using the white flag to get on the plane?"

"You can come with me, and one other man."

"It's too risky. They'd shoot us down long before they could recognize you, and long before we could get near the plane."

"We don't go to the plane," said Wade. "We go to the control tower. We're in a position to negotiate with the civvies—after all, we could wipe them out in one single assault."

"And lose the plane."

"Of course—but that doesn't make *them* feel any better. They're in the same boat as you or me, hoping against hope for the chance to survive. They can't get to the plane any more than we can, so they'll be ready to negotiate."

"Negotiate what?" growled one of the soldiers in the intently listening throng.

"Negotiate an interview with Colonel Brindle under a flag of

truce. We get them to call the plane on radiotelephone from the control tower. They send a message that Philip Wade wants to talk to the Colonel. Then three of us go over—unarmed."

"Are you crazy?"

"Unarmed to all appearances. We can carry revolvers concealed in our clothing. Meanwhile, one of your men has to work his way unseen to the offside of the plane, as close as he can. He has to be a marksman, and he will need a good rifle."

"That'll be Geordie," said the Corporal. "He can hit a mosquito at a hundred yards blindfold. And he's got a rifle with telescopic sights."

"I was a sniper in the last war," said the chunky, red-faced man called Geordie.

"Fine," Wade commented. "Well, Geordie takes up a position where he can see the pilot. That should be easy enough. The pilot will be at the controls, ready for a quick take-off if necessary. Three of us will go over to the plane to talk with Colonel Brindle. I will make the first move—I'll shoot Brindle." He turned to the sniper. "Geordie—as soon as you hear the shot, you pick off the pilot. Then we all of us deal with whoever is left in the plane, whether they put up a fight or not. As soon as the shooting starts the rest of you lob a couple of hand grenades behind the bus to create confusion, then come over to the plane as quickly as possible."

"Sounds a good scheme," Geordie murmured with satisfaction.

The corporal nodded in silent approval.

Sure, it's a good scheme, Wade thought. A spontaneous scheme, creating itself out of mental vacuum, word by word. A cold, bloody,

brutal scheme, detailed in a voice that I didn't even recognize as my own. A scheme to fit the circumstances. What's happening to me? Was I always like this, or am I changing through a vicious process of conditioning, like one of Pavlov's dogs? A mental pause. I'll think about it later, when it's all over. I'll have the rest of my life to hate myself in, but first I have to secure that life. Survival is top priority.

He said: "It will be a good scheme if everything goes according to plan. No mistakes, and that applies particularly to you, Geordie. The pilot must be killed—first time. He's the key man. Without him they can't take off."

Geordie smiled thinly and patted his rifle.

"Colonel Brindle has to die, too," Wade continued dispassionately. "He's the leader, and any group deprived of its leader is confused for a time. It's up to us to take advantage of that confusion."

"Don't worry," said the corporal.

Wade held out a hand that trembled slightly. "I want a revolver, and I want one of you to make a white flag of truce."

Somebody pushed a compact automatic pistol into his hand. He inspected it without reaction, aware of a cold ghostly hand gripping his heart, then slipped it into his pocket.

If only they knew, he told himself—if only they knew what was really here in my mind. . . . But they wouldn't believe. They would not understand the cold single-mindedness of a desperate man. I don't even understand it myself. But it has to be done, brother. It has to be done—starting here and now.

"Halt," commanded Colonel Brindle.

Wade halted, as did the corporal and the other soldier behind him. Brindle was some twenty feet away, and he had walked forward some twenty-five yards from the plane. That was awkward enough, Wade thought, but even worse was the sub-machine-gun in the hands of the man sitting in the open doorway of the fuselage cabin. It wasn't going to be so easy to convince Brindle.

"I can see that you are Philip Wade, after all," Brindle said. "You don't look much like him."

"I've been living rough," said Wade.

"You crossed the fence, Wade. We had to strike you off the list. And Miss Vance."

"Miss Vance is dead," said Wade stepping forward.

"Stay where you are," Brindle ordered. "I'll speak plainly. I've nothing to say to you, Wade, and nothing to discuss. Neither you nor the pack you have joined will set foot in this aircraft. I strongly advise you, in the name of humanity, to let the other passengers join us, but it doesn't matter if you don't."

"I don't hear much humanity in what you have to say," Wade countered, wondering whether Geordie was in position and waiting. "These men have as much right to survival as your passengers. We thought you might agree to a deal."

"What kind of deal?"

"Your women passengers, and as many of our men as you can get aboard."

"No," Brindle said firmly. "It is more important to keep your kind out than to let our kind in. Once you have been touched by violence you lose something forever. We

don't want people with that kind of twist in their minds. We'd rather close the door on all of you here, good and bad alike, than risk contamination. We have a new world to build, Wade, and we want to make it a good clean world."

"You're doing a mighty lot of judging, Colonel," Wade said sourly. "What makes you think you're a suitable citizen for a brave new world? What human qualities have you ever shown in this crisis?"

"I obeyed orders, Wade, and my final duty is to differentiate between those entitled to survive . . . and the rest."

"By what divine right do you take it upon yourself to determine the matter of life and death?"

Brindle pointed to the armed man in the cabin door of the aircraft. "My divine right is there. It's the only kind of right that has any influence now." A pause, then: "I'm sorry it has to end this way, Wade. We're much of a kind, you and I. If you were in my position you'd do exactly the same."

"And if you were me . . . ?" Wade inquired.

Brindle eyed him narrowly, then shook his head. "You used to have a good heart—good enough, at any rate. But right now I don't know you."

Wade said nothing. Time was running out.

"Call off your men and let the passengers join the aircraft," Brindle snapped. "It's the last decent action left to you. I'll give you thirty minutes—then we take off anyway."

Wade grinned faintly and with irony. "The heroic Colonel Brindle! You were dead right. We're much of a kind, but maybe I've got a bit more of it than you. Is that your last word?"

Brindle nodded.

It had to be now—there could be no further compromise. Wade turned reluctantly, exchanged tense glances with the corporal, made as if to walk away from the jetliner, then quickly and desperately drew the pistol from his pocket, flung himself to the ground, and fired. Brindle clawed at his chest, and there was stark understanding in his eyes. Wade fired again. The Colonel toppled backwards and writhed on the ground.

"Brindle, I'm sorry, but it had to be," Wade murmured. The sub-machine gun chattered angrily and the ground around him was flaked and churned by whining bullets.

And then the corporal and his comrade were firing their revolvers, and the sub-machine gun had stopped, and the man in the aircraft was toppling forward.

Wade had reached his worst moment. "Get in there," he said, from his position on the ground. "Finish them all off. I'll be right behind you."

The two men went ahead, and at the same moment Geordie appeared round the tail of the plane, grinning cheerfully. He made a thumbs-up sign at Wade, and joined the others. Wade picked himself up with deliberate slowness, dragging his feet as he walked towards the aircraft. The air was filled with the sound of shooting and wild cries and groans.

Remotely from behind came the thunder of more powerful explosions. He did not look back. The plan was proceeding to schedule. After the hand grenades the pack would be converging on the jetliner as quickly as their legs could carry them. He had about half a minute to do what he had to do.

He reached the door of the air-

craft and looked inside. The three men were mopping up, and their backs were turned to him. He did not hesitate. Three times he fired, then a fourth time to make sure. He climbed into the plane and slammed the door.

The corporal was still alive, and his eyes were full of incredulous malice. He moved his lips to speak, but only blood issued forth. Wade shot him between the eyes; he couldn't afford to take chances.

The pilot was sprawled across the controls in the cockpit. Wearily, Wade heaved his body out of the way, noting academically the precision with which Geordie had placed the bullet into his victim's brow. He took his seat and ran his hands over the controls. Through the window he could see the advancing horde—close, too close—not more than fifty yards away.

Calmly, without feeling, he took possession of the aircraft, moving forward at gathering speed, forcing power into the jets, screaming towards the control tower and the carnage behind the shattered bus. Steadily he pulled back on the control column. The jetliner lifted perceptibly, and the dark sterile ground fell slowly away.

At ten thousand feet he switched in the automatic pilot and inspected the instruments. The compass was set at due north and the automatic pilot held the plane in its inflexible grip.

He sighed deeply and rubbed his forehead. A great tenseness drained suddenly from him. It's over, he told himself. The nightmare is over. It was all a dream, an irrational dream, and soon I shall wake up and be with Janet and David, and we'll pick up life where we left off. An imperfect life, perhaps. Life is never perfect for any of us.

He pondered the nightmare for a while. Remorse darkened his mind. I touched rock bottom, he told himself. But I wasn't myself. I was in the grip of the syndrome.

But there was something wrong in the concept, and he pondered it drowsily. I'm deceiving myself, he admitted. I'm not really one of the ordinary people, nor am I really one of the survival group any more. He grimaced and laughed shortly. That was Philip Wade all over—neither one thing nor the other. The jack of all trades, master of none. Would-be husband, journalist, lover, alcoholic, government official, rebel, tough guy and killer. Latter-day prophet. *Is the Tide Going Out Forever?* The man with the flexible conscience. The opportunist who never lacked opportunity. The noble and responsible character who took to ruthless violence like a duck to water.

Brindle was right. Once you've been touched by violence you lose something forever. But forever is an overstatement. You can only lose something for a lifetime, and you can tolerate a loss for a lifetime.

He opened his eyes for a moment to glance outwards towards the drab brown wilderness that was England. In the course of time, he thought, Davey will return with others to rehabilitate this barren tormented land, but it won't be in my time. There are oceans to fill, and fields to plant and cultivate, and cities to build. And the dead to bury.

Presently he fell asleep, and the jetliner flew north at a level altitude of ten thousand feet.

They shot him down with radar-controlled anti-aircraft guns just south of the Arctic Circle.

THE END

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(Continued from page 13)

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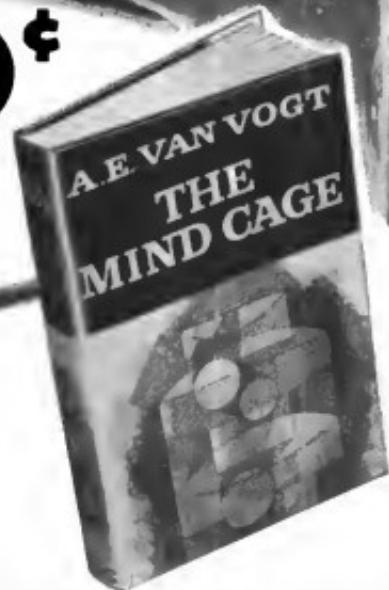
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